

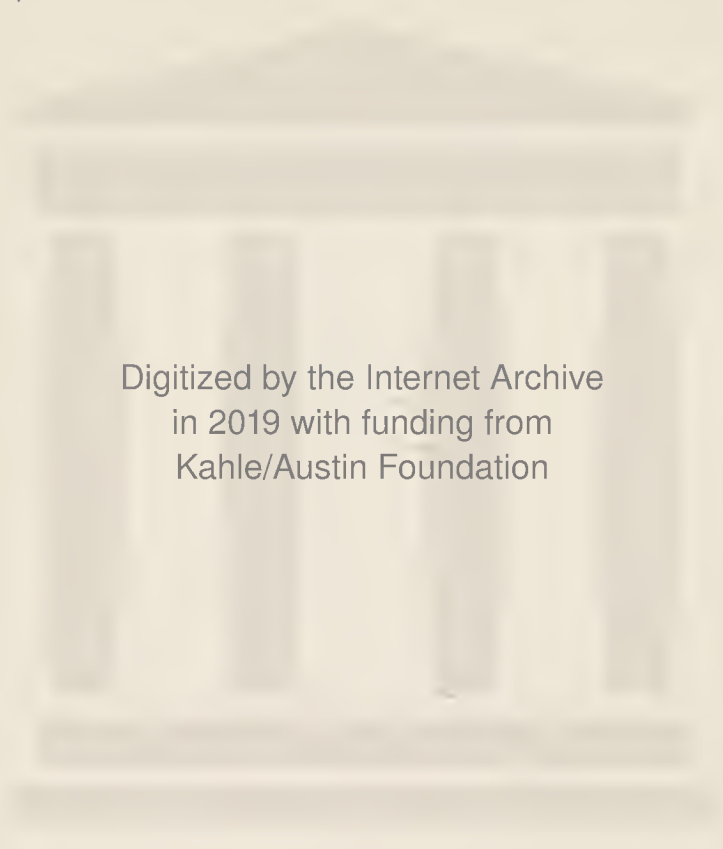


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*The Laughing Birds*  
*and Other Stories*

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*by* Archibald Sullivan

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Now one with the eternal,  
    singing stars,  
Art thou whose mind gave  
    ever of its best  
And loveliest thoughts, in words  
    like rainbow flowers.  
Thy pen laid down—  
    thy golden lute at rest!

From Helen Hamilton Dudley's  
*On the Death of Archibald Sullivan.*

# The Laughing Birds

*and Other Stories*

by  
Archibald Sullivan



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## Archibald Sullivan

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ON the 20th of August, 1886, at "Bishophurst," Sault Ste. Marie, Canada, was born the youngest son of the Bishop of Algoma, Archibald Beresford Dennistoun. He inherited from his father his Irish charm and magnetism and, on his mother's side, from the Argyle Campbells and Bruces, his love of work and common sense. Through his grandfather, he claimed descent from the Dukes Renaud and the Italian Renaldos of Modena. Thus Italy gave him his vivid imagination, passionate love of colour, music and poetry, and France, his grace and vivacity.

Not until the age of ten was he allowed to read; then Dickens, Thackeray, Scott, Kipling and fairy stories were his beloved companions. At the age of fourteen, his great sorrow came with the death of his father. He was sent to school at Loretto, Musselborough. He returned to Canada at the age of seventeen and even thus early he wrote much. Later he left for New York to make literature his profession. *Harper's Magazine* asked for a serial story, but he would not commit himself. Later

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

they published a remarkable poem called "The Housewife." For some time he was dramatic critic for *Town Topics* and contributed prose and poetry also. This is the journal which fathered much of the early work of Richard Le Gallienne, Charles G. D. Roberts, and Bliss Carman. *The Literary Digest* reviewed his "Jewel Songs" published in book form and hailed him as a new poet, "which means so much more to the world than the making of any mechanical device."

In 1904, Mr. Sullivan left with his family to live for twelve years in London, where he wrote steadily. *The Athenaeum*, *Sketch*, *Tatler*, *London Magazine*, *Bystander*, *Windsor Magazine*, *Pearson's Magazine*, *Royal Magazine*, *Ladies' Realm*, and *Fry's Magazine* published his verse and prose. His illustrated "London Streets" were poems which attracted much attention. At one time, Gabriel D'Annunzio wrote to the editor of *The Bystander* demanding with much heat who was the author who "so flagrantly" imitated his style in "The Scarlet Petal," a story of Mr. Sullivan's. At that time Sullivan had never read D'Annunzio. Mr. H. L. Brainard of New York, Carrie Jacobs Bond, Noel Johnson, and Agnes Mary Lang wrote the music for Mr. Sullivan's songs, many of which were orchestrated. Mr. Sullivan left to spend six months in Australia with a singer friend. He re-

## ARCHIBALD SULLIVAN

turned to Canada, where he applied to a militia recruiting office and was rejected, for he had a weak heart. He returned to New York and continued to work all too strenuously till he laid down his pen in July, 1921.



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# Contents

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|   | Page |
|---|------|
| <i>Atmosphere</i> . . . . .                   | 1    |
| <i>The Other Man</i> . . . . .                | 17   |
| <i>Dreamer of Dreams</i> . . . . .            | 31   |
| <i>The Price</i> . . . . .                    | 45   |
| <i>The Man Who Paid Her Out</i> . . . . .     | 61   |
| <i>Beneath the Damask</i> . . . . .           | 77   |
| <i>The Room—A Fantasy</i> . . . . .           | 93   |
| <i>R.I.P.</i> . . . . .                       | 113  |
| <i>The Conformists</i> . . . . .              | 131  |
| <i>The Liar</i> . . . . .                     | 145  |
| <i>Mary Take Care of Your Hands</i> . . . . . | 159  |
| <i>Make Up</i> . . . . .                      | 177  |
| <i>No Ribbon</i> . . . . .                    | 209  |
| <i>Kindly Omit Flowers</i> . . . . .          | 233  |
| <i>Greater Love</i> . . . . .                 | 247  |
| <i>The Laughing Birds</i> . . . . .           | 263  |





# Atmosphere



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## *Atmosphere*

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THEIR motor boat was cutting through the passionate blue of the southern sea with the keenness of a razor. The island behind them was a mere smudge, and before them the sea a desert of motionless sapphire whose limits no one could tell. When the woman spoke there was a little catch in her breath.

"It seems almost blasphemy to break into the silence. Like putting a pin prick into the biggest blue balloon ever made. It makes me feel so horribly humble. Wouldn't it be wonderful if one could take a ripple of the sky, a ripple of the sea and weave them into a prayer mat? If I could do that I'd kneel on it under a palm tree and confess all my five, ten and fifteen cent sins. I don't count the big expensive ones such as being here with you but—"

His free hand went up to her chin, caught it and held it steadily.

"After a year does it seem so very expensive—are you sorry you paid for this—for me?"

Her mouth trembled a little, but her eyes looked steadily ahead drawing in the immensity

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

of what lay before them as though it were wine.

"I just emptied the purse of my womanhood for you and this, and then I threw it over one shoulder for my friends and the world to rend to tatters. Perhaps if I went back I would still find shreds of it in half a dozen drawing rooms. Women never let women alone—not even when they're dead. They keep on exhuming them from one generation to another. And I'm dead. I died the night we left—morally died, but my resurrection with you has made me feel that unless heaven is a tropical island and the crystal sea coloured as this is, I shan't even wait to try on my wings."

His grip on the steering-wheel slackened and the boat careened on a sudden swerve that brought consciousness back to his hands.

"Then it's been worth while?"

"Worth while," she repeated, "you know it has. I don't hear the noise of the world any more. I couldn't walk on anything except saffron-coloured earth—couldn't sit under any tree but a palm—couldn't be with anyone but you."

"Then you don't miss it all—the tumult—the taxis like baby elephants tooting their way up Broadway—the electric signs—"

"My dear," she said, "when we saw that first flight of little green parrots outside our house, I realized everything. No need for argument. My mind set out its scales, and weighed that moment

## ATMOSPHERE

against past years. I'm not missing a single thing except the minutes we're not together. I think I shall sue for a divorce and name you and this heaven of ours as co-respondents."

She expected him to laugh, but the lines of his mouth hardened and she felt his shoulder quiver a little against her own.

"I always thought that so funny of you. You never wanted to get a divorce and it was so easy—so simple."

"Honey," and her hand went out to find his, "Honey, you don't understand women so very well after all. I thought you did. Some of us want our happiness to burst suddenly into flower, like an exquisite lily. I couldn't take my lily into a court room and have it pulled to pieces, petal by petal. That's what the Judge would do—the lawyers—the reporters. Then what would I have to give you? Just a withered flower. Court-stained. I can't stand flowers that people have over-handled. They're different—all the heart and soul's gone out of them."

"But I wanted you in a different way—wanted to feel I had the legal right—the lawful power of possession, but you'd never give in to it."

She leant over—trailed one hand in the salt, salt water and drew it across her lips. It was the action of a woman utterly unconscious of what she was doing.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"You never said anything quite like that before. I wonder why you said it to-day? There's not a cloud anywhere—please don't make them."

"Clouds? There's only one cloud—your hair. It's the cloud that my dreams come through. It's good of your hair to give them passports isn't it? When your hair lies loose on the pillow I think that the bleached white faced downy thing has been stitched with gold. Then I grow terrified. Am afraid that my dreams going home have knotted your hair in the pillow case and you'll have to go through life wearing a pillow instead of a hat."

She laughed—kissed him and slipped two of her fingers inside his collar.

"Aren't the silly little bits of life wonderful? The baby touches—the things that everybody else except a lover is ashamed of?"

The boat was a mere pearl half sunk in sapphire.

"I'm not ashamed of anything. I've drawn so many clean stemmed palms into my blood I could face a universe of accusers and still keep my branches upright."

"Accusers?"

"Yes. We did a very wicked thing as far as the eyes of the world are concerned. I was married—you were not. I left my husband standing tense and white-faced in the hall and met you at the



## ATMOSPHERE

station wearing exactly the same expression. But that look's all been wiped out now. The island's done it! With palms and parrots and those never-grow-tired rubies on the hibiscus bushes. We knew the moment we looked at each other. There weren't any walls to the house that day. Everything was battered down flat. I knew my fate was to float on a tropical sea with you."

She was conscious of exactly the questions he would ask and went quickly on.

"A woman always senses when a man wants her—you wanted me and I couldn't resist you. You called to me over tea cups and cocktail glasses and even across the top of the Spanish comb Mrs. Mercune had stuck at a hopeless angle in her hair. Every prong of that comb ran into my heart when I looked at you. I felt that everything in the room was whirling about me. I cannot explain the lucidity of that madness." Her voice dragged down to a whisper—"everything was different and new and strange and nothing had its proper shape or size, when I felt your eyes touch me across the room."

"And I thought,—I remember too the mad dance of my mind—that every moment you'd be arrested for coming out in daytime disguised as a night flower. I don't know what the flower is but there is a hushed crimson in it, a secret scarlet and the purple the violets use for cushions when they kneel

[ 7 ]

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

down to say their prayers. I suppose your dress-maker called it chiffon or something, but to me it was just one dream wrapt round another."

"Dear," she said, "a woman loves to have her dresses remembered. Now take me home. Don't talk to me—don't say anything—just take me home. And when we get there put your big arms around me and lift me into the long wicker chair I love. I don't want to sleep because I'm not tired but I want to 'drowse.' If you keep your little finger linked in mine I'll feel we are actually married and I've actually got the ring."

The white boat swerved and curved like a gull, then darted towards the hazy mist of palms that etched a dull finger across the edging of the sea.

\* \* \* \*

"You can see it already," she said, pushing aside the tangle of creepers that clouded the veranda. "It looks like something very tired coming home. I suppose even big ships get tired—just like people. It must be awful to keep on carrying a freight of hearts and emotions year after year. They'd be enough to sink anybody—anything—even a ship. That's why ships go down so often without any possible reason. They just can't stand it any longer."

Far, far away the nodding speck was drawing closer and closer. It began to take shape and form, revealing the lines of grace and power that

## ATMOSPHERE

till now had been mastered by the hazy distance.

"You're coming down of course to see her in? It's amusing. People always look at us as if we were wild animals; part of a south sea circus. The women regard me only as something well laundered and clean that can be approached without contagion. But that's all. On an island trimmed with parrots and hibiscus, a woman with my colouring and a man with your profile don't stand a possible chance of a reputation. Even if we *were* married the ship people wouldn't believe it."

"Don't think I'll come down," he said smiling lazily, "when I've got you, why should I worry about other people? It's always the same kind of crowd anyway—, same captain—same purser and the inevitable woman who buys a string of beads at every port. I know 'em all by heart, dear."

"Selfish," she said, ruffling his hair, "then I'll have to face that barricade of eyes alone in a simple white—"

"There isn't a woman in the world who wears white the way you do. I always think of you dressed in Easter lilies."

"Then I'll carry a scarlet parasol to counteract the funeral effect."

She tilted one as she spoke across one shoulder and went down the steps into the garden. And yet it wasn't a garden at all, only a mere tangle of exotic colours held together in the great green

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

clutching hand of the shrubbery. Over everything towered the palms motionless in the heat of the morning. She stood perfectly still for a moment as though she were looking at it for the first time. Between the tracery of the creepers that clouded the veranda like curtains of carved jade, she could see the long line of the man's body in the bamboo chair. Then for no reason at all she began to think as she had never done for more than a year. Questions flooded her brain—questions so strong that they demanded an instant answer. In this scented sleepy silence sea-bound and tyrannized by palms was she really happy? Could the man in the bamboo chair keep on filling up her life with happiness until she faced the practical end of some women's lives—age? She instantly saw herself an old woman with nothing but tropical scents and tropical effects to help her out. No diversions—no pleasures—no companionship, except that of the man who was aging with her, day by day. It wasn't his love she doubted, only her own ability to live up to it. They ate, they slept, they loved each other but outside all that there was nothing. Nightly the moon was glorious and twilight found them marvelling—the sea could support the glory of the sunset. But these things came to a full stop. The man gave her all he had to give, the island all it was, but after that there was a great glaring void. Almost mechanically she began to

## ATMOSPHERE

walk. She was angry with herself—angry because she had been unable to keep these doubting questions at bay. Her happiness had suddenly become soiled—finger-marked. And so she walked on down the dusty saffron road while the great ship came closer and closer like some deep sea monster eager to test the land.

\* \* \* \*

“You aren’t going to faint or do anything funny?”

“I—I don’t think so, but I’d like to sit down as soon as possible—any chair. They’ve all gone on shore. Take away the cushions—I want something hard and uncompromising to keep me up. And so it’s actually you?”

“Actually me. A little grayer—a little more cynical, but despite that the same husband you promised to love, honour, obey and all the rest of it. I think you rather loved me, but this island and that bungalow up on the hill give the lie to all the honour part of it.”

She stared at him. “I couldn’t help it—simply couldn’t.”

“I—nobody says you could.”

“Then people know?”

“Afraid they do. Somebody came back with snapshots of this flowery inferno—people on the dock—natives—houses—you were in one of the snaps with him, so of course, I knew.”

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"How grey you've got. There's a little bit of Christmas on either side of your ears. It wasn't there when I left but it's rather becoming. If you stayed here long enough, I'm sure it would melt."

"We're going to be here for a couple of days at least—repairs or something. Do you want me to meet him?"

He opened his cigarette case and struck a match that blazed steadily in the down pour of heat.

"You don't? Very well. I haven't the slightest desire to break up the Garden of Eden atmosphere of yours and the sartorial simplicity of your get up but—"

He touched the edge of her skirt with a careless hand.

"One doesn't need clothes—one doesn't meet anybody."

His eyebrows lifted and he smiled.

"What a wonderful reformation. Before it was always you hadn't anything to wear and you met too many people. I remember a yellow gown you had embroidered in copper wheat. Do you?"

"Paquin," she said dully.

"You know," he went on in his peculiar dragging voice. "I can easily forgive you all the man side of the business, going away with him, living here and all that. But what I can't forgive is the fact you have been untrue to yourself."



## ATMOSPHERE

"Untrue to myself," she repeated, "I don't understand."

"You would have understood a year ago, but there you've got blurred. Those sensitive edges that are such an important part of a woman have become dulled. You're being untrue to yourself at this very moment because you know perfectly well that this changeless blood-sucking heat isn't for you. You know it—I can see it in your eyes."

"I know," she said, "but I didn't till I was coming down to meet the boat—honestly. It jumped at me out of the garden. Perhaps it's been hiding there for a long time."

"What are you going to do?"

"I've made my life," she said, "I'm going to live it. It's very wonderful in some ways. He cares for me—cares for me terribly."

"A wonderful woman's going to die on this island."

"You mean me?"

"Of course I mean you."

"That means you're willing to take me back—now—as I am?"

"Exactly."

The ship was strangely still as ships always are, when slaved with ropes and cables. As they leant across the white rail, his arm went around her.

"Let me talk for a moment. Your atmosphere's all wavering. It was good for a while—splendid.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

Something you'd read about and were living out yourself. But I think you see the end of it all. Not even a fashionable funeral."

"You mean you want me back—even as I am—after everything's happened?"

He nodded and caught at her wrist.

"I've got to go," she said, "You know—up there to him."

\* \* \* \*

"We can catch the boat—it's here for two days. Aren't you glad?"

"I don't see why we have to catch the boat. I know it's here, I've—"

"They want me back in New York—the head office. Won't you love to get back? They ought to put up the scent of the subway in bottles and send it out to people like us so many times a year to make us feel at home."

She was sitting in a wicker chair with her long fingers pointed together—a mist of green behind her head and a faded flower that had once been crimson at her waist.

"I don't think I'll go," she said quietly.

"No," she repeated without waiting for him to answer, "I just don't think I'll go. You've just got me tuned to this atmosphere, the other back there would tear me all, all to shreds. Go and see Jack on the ship—you'll like each other despite the woman who came between."

# ATMOSPHERE

SHE WROTE TO THEM

"I am sending this by one of the stewards because I know he'll find you somewhere on deck with two long cool lemony looking glasses. What I'm doing isn't being done for effect. Always remember that. It was just atmosphere. But when I saw you, Jack, and smelt New York in the seams of your flannels, and when I went back to Ko and found him toasting in native underwear—oh, I don't know—I've taken the motor boat and when the gasoline runs out, I'll drift till I die—Please, please don't think I'm being theatrical—I'm not—it's the real, real thing."

\* \* \* \*

"Shall we look for her?" asked her husband.

"What's the use," said the man who loved her, "she means it."



# The Other Man



---

## *The Other Man*

---

HE had intended to leave his hat in the hall, but now the fact that he had not done so flooded him with a peculiar sense of thankfulness. It gave him something to do with his hands—something to occupy him while he waited for the doctor's verdict.

"I don't think," he managed to say at last; "I don't think, doctor, I quite understood what you said."

The doctor pushed away the chair from the desk and came over to him, dropping a light hand on the boy's shoulder. It was an action he kept especially for boys when he had something difficult to say, and this patient of his couldn't be called anything else than a boy. The consulting room was horribly still. No breath of wind lisped among the papers on the desk; a tiny clock was on the mantelpiece and its ticking seemed far, far away. Finally the doctor's voice cut into the silence of his own instruments.

"I know you'll be brave about what I'm going to say, and—"

The boy gave a tired, middle-aged laugh. "Isn't

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

it funny how all doctors use exactly the same formula? Why don't you try to vary it a little? I don't mean to be rude, but when one has gone through months of this kind of thing one becomes a little cynical. At first a lot of professional men let me down easy. It was only a matter of rest or change of climate, and they threw hope like a little golden ball far ahead of me, and I went madly chasing after it. I took all their prescribed medicines and kept all their prescribed hours. And I 'rested.' Oh, God, how funny those rests used to be! Lying in the sun with something 'light' over my feet and doing what you call 'taking it easy.' Taking it easy! Why, if you people had only known I was taking the Queen of Sheba out in an auto, taking Gaby, pearls, aigrettes and all, out to supper, taking—"

He broke away from the hand that still rested on his shoulder. His hat slipped from his fingers.

"And then—then you doctors all got together on a dark night and decided it was time to tell me something new. This time it was to be sung in unison and its motif, music and lasting echo, were all summed up in the words, 'I know you'll be brave.' "

He flung round on the doctor.

"It's true," he stammered; "you know it's true, every single word of it. Then, as a last chance, I came to you, because I hoped to hear something



## THE OTHER MAN

different, only to find that—that you're in league with all the others."

There was a pause. The clock seemed to have gained the speed of an express train.

"Even your clock knows it. Listen to it. It has joined the league, too, and wants to cheat me out of every possible moment of life."

He stooped and picked up his hat, then crossed the room and peered into the doctor's face.

"How long do you give me?"

"Give?" repeated the doctor; "that's something beyond me. I can only promise—to—"

Then he became hopelessly unprofessional and crossed nervously to his desk.

"Christmas," he said.

"Happy New Year," said the boy, and the other patients fringing the book-lined waiting-room wondered at the laughter that passed down the hall and out into the September sunshine.

\* \* \* \*

"Then I suppose," she was saying, "that you think it impossible for a woman to honestly care for two men at the same time?"

"Not impossible," said the man beside her; "merely improbable."

"But if I were to tell you it *is* possible—that it's being done every day, would you believe me?"

"I should have to, O Lady Incapable of Lies!"

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

Over their heads the September sun burnt like a sapphire on fire; at their feet gently mouthing the amber edges of the cliff, the sea was another sapphire, faintly disturbed every now and then with little rushes of pearls. Gulls went by on strange angles and wonderful swooping curves, crying and calling mournfully to each other in their flight. The woman gave a sigh of sheer contentment, and lowered her parasol. Once away from the shielding shadow her face changed.

"Musn't it be awful to leave all this forever—all this great, warm glow of things and gaily coloured life?"

"But," protested the man lazily, "one doesn't really leave them. People come back—we're coming back after we're married."

"After we're married—I wonder. But I'm talking of somebody who won't be able to come back."

"The other man, of course?"

"It isn't a man," she said; "it's a boy. He wrote me this morning. Even now I can't take it all in. It seems so futile, so utterly unnecessary."

The man took the letter, but she never noticed the queer twist to his lips and that his hand shook as he read. Her eyes were fixed on the nameless blue-gray of the horizon.

"Wonder Lady," he read, "don't think because the words are playing tag and leap-frog all over the place that I'm drunk. I'm not, but I wish I was.

## THE OTHER MAN

You know where I was going yesterday—the doctor. You know what I wanted to find out. He was a nice man, in a nice house, who charged me heavily to pronounce the death sentence. He gives me till Christmas. Oh, it wasn't dramatic or anything, just horribly still; and when I came out my taxi was ticking patiently and nothing in the world had changed one iota. I'm not writing this to ask you not to be sorry for me. I want you to be sorry. I want to borrow all your love for the little time that's left. You told me there was another man, and that some day you would probably marry him, but oh, couldn't you two strong, nerve-thrilled people wait till I go? Is he generous enough—do you love me enough? Oh, I'm not ashamed of anything I say to you now. I know you love me. It's written all over you when we're together, and I read you and read you over and over again like a book of exquisite poetry. Your smiles are the illustrations—your hands—My head aches. How I wish I had your hands for a little while! I used to think we'd marry each other and live in a house. That was silly, for of course we'd live in a house. My man gave me brandy just now—said 'they,' whoever 'they' are—thought it wiser. While I have the slightest sense left, answer this: May I come to you? Will he leave you for a little while and oh, above all, may I bury my head in your lap like a silly, silly little kid?"

[ 23 ]

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

The sea-sounds swept into the silence that followed, as if to make the very stillness audible. The gulls cried into it, as though it were a hollow shell, and a shadow like a little hand clung for a moment to the burning edge of the sun. The man handed the letter back to her.

"Do you care very much for him?"

"Yes," she said.

"For me?"

"Yes," she said again; "you know how much I care for you, but the love's different."

The man dusted the sand from one of his shoes with a tuft of dried sea-grass and drew his knees up to his chin.

"A kind of mother love for him," he said softly under his breath; "that's what you've got. Scented with talcum—has a big blue bow on it, and if he should cut his finger it would be instantly sterilized with tears. If he's only a boy he ought to be wonderfully happy with you. It's sympathy that draws the best love out of a woman."

All the colour had died out of her face.

"Don't—don't talk like that. I love you for different reasons. Because you're strong and compelling—because you've seen half the world and it's shining in your eyes. When I put my head on your shoulder I just don't care what happens to all the rest of the world."

"Isn't that rather selfish?"

## THE OTHER MAN

"Love always is, and I *do* so want love in my life. His—his is only schoolboy love, after all, but it's the real, real thing."

Suddenly she covered her face with her hands and cried silently. He saw the tears blot out the colour of her rings, and splash her gown with little spots like those of rain. Then he caught her wrists with a quick movement.

"I know what you're feeling, just as far as a man can, and I'll be generous just as far as that. I'll go away, and you can send for him. Poor kid! Close his life with all your sweetness and tenderness—the going out in that calm, dated way must be awful. We're not so wonderfully young, you and I. We're what they call fine-looking—effective—well preserved. That's one of the charms that drew the boy to you. Love him; be tender to him till it's all over."

Although the sun was still dancing its golden measure among the sand dunes, she shivered.

"It's generous of you, dear—it's kind. And he wants so little—just my hands—to rest his head in my lap. It isn't so very much to ask."

After that the sun began to droop like a tired flower. Shadows threaded themselves in and out between the grass stems, and the sea gulls passed in stately procession to the rocks they know as home.

\* \* \* \*

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"I never thought for a moment you'd allow me to come. I knew the other man, whoever he is, was at the same hotel, and I—I didn't think he'd go away and leave us together like this."

The boy lifted his eyes to hers.

"I just had to come to you. There's nobody else who cares. I'm only a silly kid, but I'm frightened, and you understand so wonderfully."

Over and over her hands passed across his hair. There was something she wanted to say to him, but the words refused to come at her bidding.

"Perhaps after all it's just as well—everything—my going. Life's always been such a terrible tangle where there was nothing but money and people paid to take an interest in me. Mother and father separated long ago, and now father's just a person making leafy noises with a cheque book. He knows all about it—wants to make it easy, but somehow he just can't do it."

He stared curiously round the room at her books and flowers and the love birds rubbing emerald shoulders in a gilded cage, then went hurriedly on.

"I know I'm only what you call a boy, but I *have* loved you. Perhaps you've laughed about it—told people; but, then, that wouldn't be like you. I suppose the other man is fine and wonderful—full of life. I don't care if he is. He's nothing to do with our being together like this—and happy."

"Nothing, dear," she managed to say; "nothing in all the world." [ 26 ]



## THE OTHER MAN

"Father once told me that there was nothing so stupid for a man as to die without having a wonderful heart affair with a woman."

Her hands slipped from his hair.

"I—I wonder if you know exactly what you're saying?"

He smiled dreamily and sought for her hands.

"Oh, yes; I learnt it by heart when I was far younger than this. I used to dream of chorus and cabaret girls and buy them flowers and wine and—"

His head slipped a little from her knee and he coughed in a tired, gasping way. "Then I met you—so gracious—so free—like one of those exquisites from a Grecian vase, and I loved you—dear God, how I loved you! Faster, and quicker and faster, because I knew there was so little time. Hasn't it all been marvellous for me? What do you call your birds? Do all these books belong to you?"

So that was what his life had been—love-hunger. Out there in the flotsam and jetsam of it all he had anchored to her—clung desperately to what affection she could give him. She was to be his last memory—his last glow when the brightness of life was dimming to a close.

"Outside in the world there's so much noise—so many colours—so many tearing motors! They've been frightening me for a long time. In here it's like the closing of a church service—the part about the peace that passeth all understanding."

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

He got up from his knees and smiled at her.

"Every morning I will come to your door with flowers and notes, and when the maid opens it I shall ask how milady rested, and say monsieur awaits her pleasure in the breakfast room. Then, you'll come down scented with late dew and early stars, and we'll walk where it's soft underfoot and blue overhead, where there's a clean, cool wind and—"

He turned suddenly and faced her.

"I couldn't go out with the other kind of love—the kind that burns and sears. That's why I came to you and begged to stay till what's coming comes. Then I shan't care. I'll come back to you in a dead leaf and settle in your hair; perhaps I'll be a sweet spring rain caressing your face, and you'll know who and what it is."

"The other kind of love," she said slowly; "I know what you mean. Dead poppies for harvest and only the memory of heavily scented dusks and cold gray twilights when everything is over. Our love's different from that."

The boy's face was radiant.

"Say that again."

"Our love's made of finer things. I love you, dear, for what you are and what you haven't been. Love you for all your boyish mistakes—your suffering—the poet hidden in your heart; but most of all because of your need of me. It's so sweet to be



## THE OTHER MAN

needed, because it means you are loved. My dear, my dear, my heart is open to you; warms all the kindness of yours at its glow and when the snow falls—”

All the radiance died out of the boy's face.

“The snow—that means Christmas—you know what Christmas means for me.”

She put her arms round his neck, and drew him close to her.

“I think the snow will be very soft and gentle with us dear. It's going to make a white world, especially for you—as white and pure as our love. My arms will be around you—your head on my breast, and all the love I have quivering about you in a great golden circle. There will be no cold, and nothing, nothing to fear, outside.”

She put one hand under his chin, and lifting it, kissed him on the mouth.

\* \* \* \*

Both her hands were clasped high on the curtains, and the tail of her black gown shadowed the floor like something curious etched in ink. Winter made what it could of white and gray with the world outside. The trees were knitting-needles, heavy with pale wool—the ground a blanket. The man at the door stood watching her for a moment. He had closed it and was leaning against the paneling, with folded arms. A hot-eyed coal falling from the grate roused her, and turning she saw him. Her hands fell.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"Yes," she said at last, "the boy with the poet's heart is writing his lyrics somewhere else now—the prince of little lovers is bowing good morning to the ladies who sit among the stars. He died yesterday."

The man cleared his throat and went over to her. His face had a strange look, like something fantastic done in gray clay. His eyes were fixed.

"I know. I came to see about—about the—"

"*You* came—you?" She moved quickly towards him—almost hurried. "Why?"

Her voice was a mere breath in the room.

"He was my boy—my son—hadn't a mother. I sent him to you to make him happy till—till the end."

With hurried fingers she touched her lips—her eyes.

"You—sent—him—to—me?"

The man nodded.

"I knew how wonderfully tender you'd be—how sweet—how loving. Do you think for one moment I'd have allowed another man—"

Something in her face blazed to sudden life. Colour flooded her face. She became a flame quivering and vitalic.

"You fool!" she said; "you fool! And I loved him best all the time."

After that the only sound in the room was the closing of the door.

# Dreamers of Dreams



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# *Dreamers of Dreams*

TO BE REALIZED HERE OR HEREAFTER

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THE woman sat in a shadowy corner of the long white veranda slowly waving a huge copper-coloured fan to and fro.

Beyond her and the crinkling yellow sand was the sea, a silent, startling blue—the blue of the tropics. A native woman in a looped-up sarong of scarlet was languidly dragging a net through the shallow water, and the woman on the veranda could see little circles of foam around her knees—the only white on all that speechless blue. Suva drowsed in the afternoon heat. The Burmese servants at the big hotel passed in and out on naked feet like brown ghosts, or crouched against the shadowed wall with nodding heads and vacant, half-lidded eyes. Beyond the hotel the dusty yellow road went staggering between the cocoanut palms, and the hibiscus trees were like a great trail of blood that dwindled and dwindled, down to the uttermost drop. Now and then a battered little carriage with two steaming ponies would dash madly through the ochre dust, or a small figure in yellow or purple wander into the dim, obscuring distance, or the penetrating cry of some bird dart

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

like an arrow through the quivering air—but that was all. Silence quelled by the heat—heat in subjection to silence.

The woman on the veranda left her long wicker chair and leaned over the low parapet. Just beneath her was a parched stretch of burnt-up grass and a tiny patch of withering flowery things that someone had tried to transform into an English garden. She stared at this for a moment, sighed and pushed back her long green veil. This was indeed a good place to wait for love. This rich, silent burning of sea, silence and colour. She felt almost a priestess standing beside an altar. The sky offered a dome of unclouded blue—the sea spread a sapphire carpet and surely the cocoanut palms were wide-feathered fans waving in stately deference to some unknown god.

“Waiting for love.” The phrase came back to her again and with it came the realization why she was there. He had sent her to this deep, quiet well of scent and shadow to wait for love and for him. He understood she was not the type of woman who emerges from the turmoil and heartrending of the divorce court smiling and triumphant. Knew she would have crept through the crowd like something mechanical, seeing nothing or anybody save the great grinning mask of a perpetual disgrace. That sort of thing was man’s work and he was doing it. In the case she would

## DREAMERS OF DREAMS

only figure as "the woman." And after it was all over he was to come to her—here, away from the crowds and reporters, the ceaseless questions, the prying eyes and the sharp, accusing finger of the law. She did not deny they had committed what the world called sin, but if sin led to this still wonder of enchantment, down that dreamy palm-fringed road, over to the scarlet shrine of that great flowing hibiscus, she chose to call it by a different and a sweeter name. Rob their story of their individualities and it became ordinary at once.

Married before they met each other, they, in meeting, instantly realized they had never been married at all. Then, on one wild, sweet night in Spring, the decision came to live the life that surely God had intended them to live—the life of love. Convention had cried aloud and society felt itself properly outraged. That was their entire story and here in the tropical, glaring stillness she was waiting for the happy ending of it.

Memories of what her old life had been flooded her brain. She saw her husband, small, shiny, bald-headed, with a long streak of gray hair like a strand of seaweed brushed across his forehead; saw their apartment set and run with the minuteness of a stop-watch; the things he admired and she shuddered at; people of his who made her very soul curl up like a leaf. All this was over now, swept forever from her life by the strong will of the man

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

who loved her. She lifted her hands from the rough parapet and passed from the shadow out into the sunshine, a parasol like a flower petal across one shoulder.

It was cooler now. The air seemed to have put on an indescribable veil and the sun uncertain of its power. A breeze hurried in from the sea and high up in the palms the cocoanuts swung to and fro like little brown beads. If love was ever to come to her it would be at such an hour as this. Strange, crystal-clear period before the sun drew back its daily golden loan and the moon prepared to walk in silver among the palms. Her soul rose to her very lips in ecstasy and—

“You know, dear, I am most particular about the lights being on at six. They give the house such a prosperous appearance. What have you been doing—why are you all alone?”

She passed one hand across her eyes and looked at the man. He was small, shiny, bald-headed, with a long streak of gray hair like a strand of seaweed brushed across his forehead.

“Dreaming,” she said, “that’s all.”

\* \* \* \*

The man relit his pipe and instantly turned back to the rail. Softly as any bird the island rested on the sapphire water. An emerald bird it was, but with soft, sleepy curves and an outline that was



## DREAMERS OF DREAMS

very, very tender against the sky. His heart throbbed with the heart of the huge ship. He leaned forward, far into the breeze, drew in the drowsy land-scents and his eyes closed for the fraction of a second. Would there be a carriage? How far away was the hotel? Would she be waiting for him in *their* room? At the last two words he paled a little under his tan, then his teeth clicked again on his pipe and the Island of Suva went on growing and growing as though under a magician's hand.

Slowly the ship dragged itself shorewards like some wounded creature from the deep and at last quivered to rest against the battered wharf. Shrill cries, glitter of beads, long laid-out lines of bejeweled-looking fruit and a mass of brown bodies half wrapped in vivid tints.

The scene became a blur to him. The fruit danced and cried while the brown bodies laid themselves down and awaited purchasers. Their island! Even the palms seemed to know it and beckon. The slow-rolling breakers knew it, too, and were willing to show him the way. He felt he was being held very close to the heart of something. Clear colour, light or poetry—which, he could not define. His veins ran with a new-found sense of freedom. And they *were* free—now. The strong breath of the law had blown down all barriers and although parts of the wreckage would

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

cling to them forever they were free—utterly free. He knew the look he would find in her eyes. Had seen it a thousand times in his heart, clung desperately to it when the rasping voice of the judge tore at his very soul. But there had always been one vision soaring pure and untainted above the dust and turmoil of the courtroom—that of a quietly beautiful woman wandering under the cocoanut palms by the edge of an unutterably blue sea.

He saw at last the sea and the wind-curved palms and knew the woman would be waiting for him with wide and welcoming arms. All thoughts of his wife were crushed aside as things belonging to another world. They had no part with this strange, mystic land and its dark, dreamy people. Nothing belonging to the past must ever ripple the surface of the future. He knew his bronze face quivered as he went down the gangway; knew the heat was stupendous. Heat to dream and drowse in, then drowse and dream again.

Brown hands were stretched out to him, brown feet pattered after him on the hot timber, around the ship brown bodies plunged from long, narrow dugouts, diving for coins thrown from the deck of the ship. He hurried on—it all meant nothing to him. There was only one point to be made and one height attained. The woman in the quiet, dim hotel who was waiting for him.

The sudden movement of the dusty little carriage

## DREAMERS OF DREAMS

touched something in his brain and he realized the whirling of dust down a street that dwindled from shops to native houses and from those to an alley of cool green through which, at intervals, the palms stood up like giant candlesticks. Then the hotel became something white, suddenly set down in front of him. People, a book—his signature—the door of their room and—

“What a stupid thing it is, to sit moping in here, when there’s bridge in the library. I want another cheque, please, and tonight we’re *both* going to the same dinner. I’ve accepted for us.”

A woman was standing beside him. Her face was slightly flushed and she played incessantly with an ornament at her breast.

“Dickie, what in heaven’s name have you been doing?”

He looked curiously at her for a moment.

“Dreaming,” he said, “that’s all.”

\* \* \* \*

The woman in the bed flung out one arm, drew it in again, then turned her head fretfully from side to side.

“You know, nurse, this dying is an awfully expensive business. I count up the cost of it at night and my husband does the same thing at the office in the morning. I can just see him. All done on envelopes and the backs of old letters. He ought

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

to get a movie taken of it and have it screened every night before dinner instead of having a cocktail. Is my boudoir cap straight? They might catch me when I wasn't looking."

The nurse circled the bed, large, white and impressive.

"I've often wondered," the dry, even voice went on, "what becomes of those large, healthy-looking buildings they pull down after expositions are over. I know now: they make them into nurses. They're large and dependable, and so easily moved about. Will they give me a hatpin with my halo?"

The nurse began to speak. The woman in the bed laughed.

"Oh, don't—just don't. All that's left of my life is my own, private property and—and you can get arrested for trespassing. Yes, put your hand under my head. How heavy my hair feels! Has anyone been tying things onto the end of it?"

She sat up, the lace falling from the sharpened line of her shoulder.

"Nurse, is that a dog at the end of the bed?"

Her husband with the streak of seaweed hair looked, shivered and sighed, and lifted his head.

"Don't you know me dear?"

"Of course I do, silly. I've known you for years. Silly years, weren't they? You brought me home violets when I wanted palms—never had any sense of proportion—silly, not having any sense of pro-

## DREAMERS OF DREAMS

portion. 'Member I wanted to go to the tropics—Suva—and you wouldn't let me go? Silly of you! Pretty sound Suva, hasn't it? Soft, like a lot of fur muffs rolling down a hill. And now I'll have to go there all by myself unless—"

Her voice caught as though in a trap. There was a horrible stillness in the room—a stillness that tiptoed to every article, warning it to be ready for the Great Visitor who knocks at all doors and will not be refused. For a moment the woman turned her face to the wall, then quickly back towards her husband.

"I wonder if souls have to promise on their word of honour to go straight to heaven? I don't think so. Even children are allowed a little recess after school—and oh, life has been so like school. Too many lessons—too little play—makes Mary a very stupid woman. No—that's all wrong, but what does it matter—what does anything matter any more?"

The nurse moved a bottle—the husband pressed his handkerchief into a moist ball. Then the voice began again:

"Just dress me in something simple and white, and don't put any flowers in my hands, only my green sunshade that looks like a bowl of little leaves. That's all I want. I know my way to the hotel. I wonder if the woman in the red sarong will still be dragging her net in the shallow water?"

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

The nurse stooped quickly over her. The husband gave the cry of a frightened animal and started forward. But the woman had passed beyond the narrow circles of both sight and sound.

\* \* \* \*

His wife sat just within the yellow circle of the candlelight, her eyes fixed on his set face.

"It's no use," he was saying, as he drew a long, thin finger along the edge of the sheet. "It's no use trying to have or keep secrets any more, and besides there isn't much time. I knew why you went out with the doctors just now, and I know exactly what they said. Why lie about it? I'm going out to something better than all this. I've had my dreams and my dream woman."

He saw her eyes quiver and watched them turn away.

"I was only untrue to you in my dreams. I'm going to follow them—and her. I've been up that road with its palms and big stains of hibiscus thousands of times, so I shan't lose my way. Ebony and silver it's going to be when I arrive, and the breeze in the treetops will be as tender and soft as an old lady folding lace."

Her lips were terribly dry. She was frightened of him—of what he was saying.

"And your woman—your Dream Woman?"

"Knows the way as well as I do. And it's quiet



## DREAMERS OF DREAMS

there. The little vines run after you like children, till you have to stoop down and play with them and—”

“But, dear, you’ve never been there.”

“I’ve been living there for years. You never realized it, that’s all.”

He lifted himself on one elbow and brushed the heavy yellow hair out of his eyes.

“There was a native woman in a scarlet sarong who dragged her net through the shallow water and—”

He fell back almost silently among the pillows, but the candle shone on like an amber star and the wife sat motionless within its glowing circle.

\* \* \* \*

The Suva moon! Green hills had gone black for it and the ebony sea here and there ran into little bows and crescents of pearly foam to do it honour. Somewhere in a hidden place a native instrument was drumming its heartbreak into the night. At the big hotel standing pale and aloof from everything each window was a darkly lidded eye. There in the sheltered, misty shadow of the veranda the Soul of the woman waited—clear and shining in the dark. And to it, out of the great hollowed hand of the tropical night came the Soul of the man. For what is space to a Soul? Oh, take what wood and stone you will during life to wall out

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

Love. Lock up your women in the vault of marriage. Set your men swinging on the slender thread of their honour. The White Mounted Rider has but to march a little way down the home road and all these things come to the last quiet end.

"It has been a long time," whispered the Soul of the man, "yet every night you used to come to me. Sleep brought you at first—sleep and night. Then I grew able to find you even in the crowded glare of day. I used to come to you here. I know each palm—every hibiscus tree—even the burnt grass."

"A little green mat killed by the sun," said the woman's Soul. "But I knew you would come. Nothing on earth ever hurt me after that. I used to dream you sent me here to wait till you were free. That you battled for me among dust and noise and heavy voices, then came at last and found me waiting with outstretched arms."

"I spent half my life on the road to you, and yet—"

"What?"

"On earth we never knew each other."

"Only in dreams," said the woman's Soul.

\* \* \* \*

And so through the warm, dusky beauty of the night they rose together, past palms and stars, past the golden glory of the moon, past time, past space, on to Him who giveth His beloved Dreams.



# The Price



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## *The Price*

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SHE was sitting up in the bed, bright, eager-eyed and even smiling. The nurse had opened the windows and the rich riot of the garden outside drifted into the room like incense from an altar. And there were windows everywhere. She had said when they were building the house that her room must breathe as well as herself; told her husband that if she waked in the night she wanted to be able to let the essence of the sea and garden sweep her back to dreamland. He had always done what she wished, except once, and that was when he died three months later. The memory of it all didn't come back to her now, because it was ever present; it only kept throbbing with a new intensity on a keener, sweeter note.

"Dearest," he had said, "it's such horribly bad form to die and leave you. It's really a breach of love's etiquette, and ever since our marriage I've prided myself on my manners. No—I want the other hand with the ring on it. Dear God, what a fuss we made over that little band of gold! And the lilies—do you remember the lilies? I was terrified I'd never find you among them, you looked so

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

like one. Fancy if I'd married a lily and the Horticultural Society wouldn't allow me to get a divorce."

Then they had smiled and sighed in unison and looked unutterably happy.

"This—this is the only invitation I've ever accepted without you, Deary, and it's hard to leave you behind. All the time I lay under the car in that horribly conscious tangle I kept worrying about keeping you waiting. There wasn't any pain with it. That was all submerged by the idea you'd be wearing blue, with that one little curl that will play truant from the rest shining on your forehead."

After he died she took up life, not as a shattered, hopeless thing, but rather as some rare treasure he had left her to keep intact. In the long night and day of eventuality they would meet—till then——

Her mind came winging its way back like a bird to existing things. The nurse, the open windows, the green palette of the garden splashed with colour and the blue smudge of sapphire beyond that meant the sea. With a slight movement, at which the nurse turned hurriedly, she settled her head deeper among the pillows.

"Life's been too easy for me, Nurse," and she gave the ghost of a laugh; "but that wasn't my fault. People must just go on blaming God, that's all. He made a little cubbyhole for me and lined it with swansdown. He filled it with rose leaves

## THE PRICE

and dreams and then sent the most splendid man in the world to keep away the winter wind. And then, Nurse, he took the splendid man away, and the rose leaves were blown heaven knows where, and the dreams were all wrecked in the tree tops, and so you see, Nurse——”

A door closed suddenly at the far end of the room. The noise of it stung through the drowsy quietness, waking echoes that seemed to reach to the very heart of the garden. The woman in the bed made a futile outstretching of arms.

“Why, son, I didn’t think you could possibly get here till tomorrow. Some stupid person hurried you up with a telegram saying I was ill. But you should have telephoned or something. Even old-fashioned mothers like to look nice in bed when their great big footballing sons come to call.”

The nurse had just managed one of those noiseless exits for which her profession is so famous and highly paid.

He was only a boy, and yet, as she looked at him with mother eyes, she wondered if he had ever been a boy at all; wondered if youth had not smiled cynically at a whimpering morsel in flannel and passed by on the other side. He represented what people call a fine man. His hair was touched with a tawny colour that found an answering note in his eyes, and he was physically built on those big muscular lines that compel attention. Possibly the

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

droop of his long lashes hinted at a poet, and the curve of his mouth might have been that of a lover, but he was mostly plain, ordinary, everyday man.

"I didn't know what to bring you from town, but I suddenly thought of lilies—Easter ones. It isn't Easter time and there's no special meaning to them, but I just felt like lilies for you—that's all. They're downstairs. Of course, the starched person in the crooked cap and the apron laid out like an architectural design won't allow them in the room at night, but——"

"Dear thing," she said slipping her hand into his, "dear thoughtful thing. You're not supposed to sit on the bed because I'm sterilized or something horribly professional and the G. G. G., which means the great grey gull who hangs over me all day long, will come swooping down and order your deportation. Oh, honey, it's so good to have part of you with you—*now*."

He drew back and she saw his lips were quivering.

"You don't mean they've given up all hope?"

"No, dear; I mean I've just found hope—release, and exit. You see, when a woman throws her heart into heaven after a man goes there, she hasn't got much left to do on earth."

"But"—the boy's face was like a mask turned towards her—"but there may be some mistake."

"When the nurse grows over-polite in attending

## THE PRICE

to your pillows and the butler tells you the doctors lit their cigars before leaving, there *is* no hope. I know it, they know it, the very garden knows it. The G. G. G., who wanders there when off duty, says the way the white flowers have come on during the last two days is extraordinary. Honey, don't take anything out of the garden for me—I didn't for him. It's always been such a happy garden. I don't want a single petal of it to know anything about crape and funerals. Just buy me Easter lilies. Buy them in a big shop on the Avenue where they are crumpling wax paper and wiring huge ribbon bows onto fantastic baskets—somewhere it *smells* of Easter."

He had slipped to his knees and his face was buried in the wadded softness of the satin quilt. She touched his hair and slowly drew one finger across the broad line of his shoulders.

"Don't cry, son. It's absolutely necessary for society and the coming generation that old women like your mother should pass on and find out what the stars are made of. Besides, there's your father. I never had much religion, dear, but even realizing he could never learn the harp and would look ridiculous in a halo, I know perfectly well that the man who made heaven out of earth for me will be waiting in heaven to put enough earthly things into heaven to make heaven sevenfold times heaven. Remember that, dear, because it might possibly

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

be my last bright remark. And oh, big little person who used to and still throbs under my heart, don't be afraid of death for me. The black's quite tame, and the white of it will eat out of your hand, and what comes after is just a little caress in the dark. But I want you to go back to town, dear. I'm going to be like this for months, and a mid-summer garden is such a stupid place for a boy if he isn't in love. Are you in love, honey?"

He lifted his tear-stained face to hers.

"With nobody, mother."

"I'm glad, son. Just kiss me quietly and go. Send up your lilies. It doesn't matter what the G. G. G. says. I want them in the room. No, dear; kiss my hand. It makes me feel regal, and besides, you know medicines—so many horrible medicines——"

He stooped and drew her into his arms.

"Dear strong thing," she whispered, "marry a dear, sweet girl and show me what her frocks are going to be made of. I want to tell your father—afterwards."

\* \* \* \*

The room was heavy with scent. The lights were vague and of uncertain colouring, and on a dark, oriental screen flights of white birds and drooping flowers trailed out their lives in the dusk of a corner. She was in green—serpent green—one sharply pointed elbow on the marble mantelpiece



## THE PRICE

and the flicker of the fire sweeping over her in contradictory waves of colour. The boy was hunched in a chair, moody and silent, with a burnt out cigarette pendant between his lips.

"I wonder," she said at last, "why sentimental people are always so hopelessly dull? I like men who arrive like a bull fight—skyrocket people. And oh, by the bye, I've been thinking about something. When do you mean to marry me? I want the best satin, the best church and the best people. Things in the papers, too. You see, dear, when one isn't exactly what one ought to be one likes to see it denied in print. The power of a smart bishop and a little ring is incalculable. So I think you'd better marry me, dear, with all the pomp and circumstance you can afford, and then we'll do our best to live happily ever afterwards."

She moved towards him.

"But, Lal, I don't care for you in that kind of way. We've been what we've been to each other, and there's an end to it."

"An end to it?" she repeated; "that's a man's version. I want something more than that. I want to drift past your friends in a mist of pearls and family lace, and then float down from the altar wearing your name like a bow in my hair."

He lifted his face and looked at her.

"But, Lal, you're so much older." The next moment he wondered if he had struck her, for she

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

staggered and caught at her heart. Her carefully "arranged" face seemed to give up all power of resistance and fall into the lines nature had intended. She touched her throat, her hair and stared vacantly round the room.

"Older, dear? Yes, of course—maybe—perhaps—naturally. But—but, my dear, you must never make a woman feel she's wearing her baptismal certificate instead of a sidecomb. I don't care how old I am, you've got to marry me."

He stood up and came very close to her.

"I'll never marry you," he said quietly. "It doesn't matter what we've been to each other or anything else, I'll never marry you. I've seen a woman today who showed me what women ought to be. It rather frightened me. She believed in the beautiful, the exquisite. She believed in my father—and she's dying—and she's glad to die because she knows she's going on to meet a man who's always been straight and splendid, and she's taking all her memories with her and——"

The woman hadn't said anything—she only looked at him. But the expression in her eyes silenced him.

"I knew your father," she said at last.

"You knew my father?" The boy stammered the words. "In what kind of way did you know my father?"

"Just ways," said the woman and smiled.

## THE PRICE

"Does—did mother know?"

The woman shrugged her powdered shoulders.

"A man without a past," she said, "is a man without a future."

After what seemed an incredible time to them both she came over to him and laid a light hand on his shoulder.

"When women get to my age they often do peculiar things. I'm going to do one of them. I'm going to make you marry me. Existence has suddenly got awfully 'hurried' for me and I've got to find a place to keep quiet in. You're the place."

"And if I refuse?"

She lit a cigarette and blew the smoke ceilingwards.

"I'd go and tell *her* about *him*."

"You wouldn't—you couldn't—she's dying."

"My dear, that makes no material difference to me. Women after forty become desperate. It's not because I care for you very much, but I want your name and to prove that at my age I was clever enough to marry. That is all."

For a moment he seemed uncertain what to do. He looked down at his hands.

"You don't mean you'd go to her and tell—tell her about him?"

"It remains with you whether I tell her or not."

"Then it's all a kind of threat. Unless I marry

[ 55 ]

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

you you'll let her go into eternity with all her illusions shattered—all her dreams broken—everything she's clung to for so long—a wreck."

"My dear," she said quietly, "as I said before, women at my age do anything. I dare say your mother is quite a charming person and I'm honestly sorry she's got to be dragged into the affair, but I've got to look after myself—I've got to marry."

"And just fancy"—his voice was filled with a suppressed wonder—"just to fancy one woman—"

"Yes, my dear, I know it must seem curious to you, but the depth of what one woman will do to another is beyond all power of telling. You'll do anything rather than have her hurt or let her know the truth about your father, and so that's why you're going to marry me."

He stared at her for a moment.

"Yes," he said at last. "I'll marry you. She musn't go out of life with an aching heart. I'd offer you money, but you're not that kind. You've got the sudden craving for respectability and know my name can give it to you. I suppose you've had everything else out of life except that. I can't see God anywhere behind all this business, but I suppose He's got reasons of His own for not stopping it. From a dramatic standpoint I shall be doing rather a fine thing."

She came over to him and ran her heavily jeweled fingers through his hair.

## THE PRICE

"That," he said with a quick movement, "isn't included in the bargain, but as far as marrying goes I'll marry you whenever you choose."

\* \* \* \*

Time had meant nothing to her. Days, weeks, months were like a softly murmuring stream that flowed past the end of her bed. She knew that she was alive, conscious of sunlight and dark, but beyond that life had come to a full stop.

"And so," she was saying, "my boy's actually married. I'm glad I was here, honey. If I'd heard about it afterwards I'd have been rather hurt. It was nice of you to do it when I was alive. I know she's like apple blossoms. You couldn't marry anybody who didn't look like that. When things go wrong, son, call her a little 'kiss' name and take her into the moonlight—if there happens to be any. Yes, put your arms around me. Pillows are very comfortable, but they haven't an ounce of affection. And she's downstairs. Fancy my son's wife downstairs!"

Words came to him, but seemed to lose their way. He looked round the room as though in search of something.

"Mother"—and there was a catch in his voice—"father was very wonderful, wasn't he?"

She smiled happily through her tears.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"If you look into my heart, honey, you'll see exactly how wonderful he was. But I want to see her, dear. I'm going to play games with the lavender water and comb till you come back. Tell her not to expect too much from a woman on her way to her funeral."

\* \* \* \*

The two women looked at each other, and then, after a long, long pause the woman in the bed began to speak.

"And so it's my son now? I wonder why you want to rob me of everything? It didn't matter so much about his father, because he was older, wiser, and bound to come back to me, but my son——"

The boy's face had gone white. "She never told me you *knew*. She said she'd come and tell you all about father if I didn't marry her. And I didn't want you hurt, or to find out anything horrible about him, and——"

"Honey," she said softly, "I knew about it all the time—even before he told me himself. But he was too splendid to quarrel with. He came back. That was all that mattered."

The other woman fingered her pearls.

"And his son pays the price."

The woman in the bed sat up.

"My dear," she said, "when you do something

## THE PRICE

for love there isn't any price. That's why he married you—for love of me. You're getting nothing from him but his name. He hasn't got anything to give you. And even if his life with you is an empty, barren thing he'll have something in his heart singing all day long."

She waved an uncertain hand and fell back among the pillows.

"It seems awfully hard, honey," she whispered, "that all kinds of love is so expensive. Yours for me has cost such a terrible price."

The next day the nurse left. Nobody needed her any more.





# The Man Who Paid Her Out



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## *The Man Who Paid Her Out*

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SHE leant lightly against the rail of the huge steamer. Just below, the dock was a stretch of ant-like activity. Great trucks of multi-coloured luggage, starred with red and blue labels, were devoured by the hold, one after another. Dreary mail sacks hurled themselves down a long chute, like autumn leaves, and over everything was the spell of restless, hurrying animation. The air was full of partings, and she wondered idly how many good-byes had built themselves nests of memory under the freight shed's smoky eaves. Small, ineffective tugs romped round the ship's gigantic bow and stern, like children playing with their father. How busy, how hurried, everyone seemed to be, except herself! All these lives round her were filled with a routine that worked on from day to day. The very ship itself was fulfilling its predestined duties. She made a hasty movement, and raised the soft purple folds of her veil. Barker, the maid, peered across her mistress's shoulder and sniffed faintly. There was something that was almost indecent to her in this endless rush

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

—a complete lack of repose utterly un-British, and therefore an utter abomination. Again she sniffed, and darted in at the cabin door, like a superior rabbit. Mrs. Ainslee drew the end of her veil slowly between her fingers, and wondered why she ever decided to visit New York.

“I beg your pardon.”

She turned with sudden abruptness in the direction of the voice.

“You?” she said. “Where have you come from? The sky, the sea, or the bottomless pit?”

Unconsciously she had held out her hand, and it was still engulfed between his. She drew it gently away. The big man smiled at the movement.

“I never remember where I came from last, and don’t care where I go to next.”

“Which all sounds most reckless and highly unprofitable.”

“And you?” he asked.

They both felt the wide doors of memory and the past swing gradually back on their hinges. She remembered her wedding to the other man—the man with the money, the man who always reminded her of a chilli pickle dressed in blue serge. The whole affair rose up before her in a rioting pantomime of flowers, dresses, and wedding cake. Her mother seemed to ride past on a purple velvet horse, bridled with sable and family lace. Her father, muzzled by a gigantic gardenia, stared with

## THE MAN WHO PAID HER OUT

appalling placidity from the ramparts of a scarlet Prayer Book. Then came the bridesmaids, in a slim, faultless line of youth, wearing the bridegroom's gift, a poodle in diamonds. She had felt that she herself was the poodle—even to the diamonds the similarity was complete. She had arrived at church clad in the fashionable frigidity of white satin, and, on the command of a bishop, leapt through her hoop—the hoop of an advantageous marriage. Yes, memory paraded every detail before her now that years had passed—the whisper of criticism as she came up the aisle; the constant litany of satin touching satin, and moving on again; the hysterical sweetness of the organ that babbled past her, like so much water. Lastly she remembered the face of the other man—the man who now stood beside her—a white, smiling mask of suffering. Somewhere behind them a whistle sounded, shrill and plaintive. It seemed to catch and drag her back to the things of the present.

“And I?” she repeated, taking up his question. “I’ve been dragged through the slough of widow’s weeds, and emerged on a mauve and purple shore. *C’est tout.*” There was a shrug of shoulder with the last words. Methodically she creased the purple veil round the wide brim of her hat, and the sunshine burnished itself against the fine gold of her hair. She hadn’t changed, and she wished him to see and appreciate the fact.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"No, you haven't," he said, divining her thoughts. "You haven't changed in the least. It makes me feel almost parental. You must respect my grey hairs. Who was it said that white hair was the mendicant for deference?"

"I think all quotations should have been lost centuries ago. I'm going to side-track the conversation and hide my complete ignorance. Are you seeing someone off, or are you New York bound yourself?"

"I'm the medico on board," he explained. "It's my job to doctor the ship. Anything from water on the brain to a splinter."

"Ah!" she said.

Was she glad or was she sorry? Again and again the two questions dashed up to her, like furious little trains waiting the lading of an answer. Both steamed away unsatisfied.

"And you like it?" she went on. "You like this—these storms and rumour of storms, the dry unfruitfulness of mail-bags, the stolid, patched faces of the trunks, the here to-day and gone to-morrow people you must meet?"

"Yes, I like it," he said quietly. "Commotion is always healthy, and, besides, it keeps me from thinking."

"Ah," she said again, "that's what we all want!" She smiled, sighed, and let down her veil.

He must care—he did care for her still. Would

## THE MAN WHO PAID HER OUT

he have said that if he didn't? She could answer the two dashing questions now. She was glad to find him again, glad to be near him. The flame of their past love seemed to blaze up in her eyes, and she let its brightness shoot out towards him. His voice was unsteady when he spoke.

"You'll excuse me, I know. Sailing's always a busy time for everybody on board. Can I look forward to the evening? It's so nice, our meeting again."

"Till to-night," she said, holding out a slim, purple-gloved hand. How cautious he was! How different from what he used to be! And to call their meeting "nice"! She turned once more to the rail with a laugh. The action on the dock below had become almost desperate now. Late arrivals, with wrinkling brows and slavish stewards, struggled up the gangway, counting and recounting their rugs and dressing-cases. The very sky itself, cloudy and hurrying, seemed saying good-bye to something in the great unseen. Suddenly she became conscious of a strange lassitude creeping over her, a nameless depression that steals into the hearts of so many travellers. She turned quickly from the rail and walked down the crowded deck towards her cabin.

\* \* \* \*

The night sea was whispering and rustling up

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

and down in a stealthy monotone under the dark starlessness of sky. Their chairs were close together. She could see the red point of his cigar burning like a distant beacon in fairyland.

"And then life became one long cry," she was saying, "of 'How am I going to stand it?' and 'What am I going to do?' The very thing I married for grew loathsome—money. I used to stamp on my cheque-book as though it were something alive."

"Go on," he said quietly—"you interest me."

She drew back. "Interest you?" she repeated. "In what way—how? You'd think I was a strange specimen of some kind. Are you talking to me as an every-day doctor or a—a once dear friend?"

He let the question go by, and a long, indistinct trail of smoke wandered from his lips in fantastic curves. It waved across her face and hurried in ethereal tatters out to sea.

"I'll tell you a story," he said—"a plain story of a plain man and a beautiful woman."

She knew what that story was going to be, and lay quietly among the cushions. Then Fate seemed to seize her and shake her like a rag doll.

"I'll tell that story." Her voice was low and very quick. "I've got a right to tell it, and, anyway, you'd get the wrong version. In your story the woman didn't care—at least, you think she didn't—but, oh, if you only knew the truth!"



## THE MAN WHO PAID HER OUT

The truth!" he said harshly. "Who knows it better than I do? Didn't you throw me over on account of pounds, shillings, and pence? Didn't you marry that dried little wisp of humanity——"

"Hush—don't—he's dead!"

How loud the sea was! She heard the multitude of the waves hurrying past in long, sombre procession. Now and then slim things of foam leapt into the air, white and ghastly against the black.

"Don't you think there's a question of justice somewhere?" His face was close to hers as he spoke.

"Justice—justice?" She said the word after him. "I've paid my penalty. You don't know what life was, with all the beauty of it gone. I went on caring for you just the same, because I couldn't help myself. Day in, day out, I used to say: 'Whom is he with? What's he doing? Does he still care?' If you suffered, you at least suffered by yourself; I had to smile with only a cheque-book to help a breaking heart."

Oh, the memories that came back to her now! Did she realize actually how much she had suffered? The recollection of her married life danced wildly in the night.

"But I've never had the chance to pay you out for all my suffering—my loneliness."

"Pay me out!" She sat abruptly up in her chair.

"Pay you out," he insisted. "You married him for

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

the luxury he could give you, and you got that luxury. If your heart ached, it was under a Paquin gown. If your arms were empty, they were at least laden with bracelets. You had what you wanted, and the pain that went with it. Where did I come in? What did I gain?"

She said nothing, because she knew there was nothing to say. He was perfectly right, and she ought to be paid out. What a childish phrase!

"You were kind to me yesterday," she managed to say.

"I've thought things over since then. I've seen you walking the deck, young, pretty, and admired. You're still unmarked by what you've gone through. You've freedom and his money. Perhaps you'll marry again and——"

"No, no—never—I couldn't! Do what you want—pay me out. It doesn't matter, because I've deserved everything."

Then, in a flash, she realized what that paying out would be. She cared for him, and he knew it. He would only turn to her a heart of iron, and her fate was to go on caring and caring till the end of time. There are some things a woman knows with the certainty of life and death. She made a slight movement with her neck as though bowing it to a yoke. This was to be her paying out. She stood up, and one scarlet cushion fell glaring into a patch of electric light.

## THE MAN WHO PAID HER OUT

"I'm tired," she said unsteadily. "You can go on with the paying out system tomorrow."

He sat perfectly still long after she was gone, staring—always staring—at the hurrying black of the sea.

\* \* \* \*

"No, I haven't even the vestige of a plan when we land"—she turned one page of her novel and put it down—"and, as far as you are concerned, I can imagine you crossing and recrossing the Atlantic till the end of time."

"Yes, I think so," he said.

It seemed strange that they should be talking the plain, banal things of every day. To her each day was an intensified crisis that had to be gone through, and yet he was paying her out. She felt the need of him almost hourly, and when the end of the voyage came, what lay beyond? She did not dare to think. It was enough that he was with her now, and she thrust away the future with resolute hands. He lit a cigarette, and she watched the reflected light shining between his fingers.

"But my being away so much is hard for my wife. You didn't know I had been married."

Yes, the words came from his lips. They were painted all up and down the blue sky in living letters of flame. Something like a great cold hand grasped her heart. Then it fluttered with sickening rapidity.

[ 71 ]

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"No," she said, moistening her lips, "I didn't know—I hadn't heard."

He was paying her out—he was paying her out! For the moment the fact stood out in appalling crudity. The sea beat in upon her, and the sky sank over her like a trap. Oh, the pity of it—the tired, dreary pity of it! He watched her face, and the cigarette in his hand sent up a tiny spiral of smoke.

"A woman can't expect a man to keep his life open till she changes her mind a second time."

"No," she said humbly, "no woman can."

Her mind sped away to the other woman on a wild pilgrimage of jealousy. His wife! She gave the ghost of a laugh. What she needed was a sense of humour. That was her immediate need, and she prayed for it as some women pray for their souls. The ghost of a laugh came again, only stronger.

"Am I too late with my congratulations and silver cream jug, or would you prefer a set of pearl studs?"

He stared down at her. The face beside him was brilliant with rose colour, and a tense brilliance in the eyes. The lips, too, were very red and slightly parted. Then she laughed for the third time.

"You poor dear, did you think I cared as much as all that? That I wanted to marry you? Is this

## THE MAN WHO PAID HER OUT

what you call paying me out? Do I look so terribly broken-hearted?"

She rattled off the questions with a nervous gaiety.

"No," he said, flushing a dull, brick colour, "of course it couldn't possibly matter to you. I was quite right in thinking you didn't care."

He bowed stiffly and walked away. Almost desperately she let down her veil. Her hands played aimlessly with each other, and she hid them beneath the rug. Every woman in life has a fairy tale that she hopes to play princess in some day, and if the fairy tale never comes true—well, it was only a fairy tale, after all. The woman in the long deck-chair sat very still. Her fairy tale had ended. The prince had gone. There was nothing more to do. She wouldn't think about it. Her one big business in life must be, from now on, forgetfulness. Her maid moved into stiff, formal attention behind her chair.

"Madam will wear to-night——" She left the end of the sentence open.

"Wear," said her mistress, and there lay in her voice a terrible weariness—"wear! Black, Barker, black!"

\* \* \* \*

She stood at the door of the surgery, only knowing that he had sent for her, only realizing that there was something wrong—horribly wrong.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

The faint odour of chloroform whispered its way towards her. The captain seemed to come suddenly from nowhere. She stepped into the cabin, smiling vaguely. So this was where he worked. What a lot of bottles, and how clever of him to keep them against the wall like that! The ship gave a slight roll, and the small vials of liquid winked in the electric light.

"It was in the steerage." She heard the captain quite distinctly. "The doctor was there, vaccinating a child."

Why did the captain hold her arm, and where was the man who had paid her out?

"There was some sort of row," the captain went on hurriedly, "among the Galicians about the vaccination, and the doctor was——"

"Quick," she said—"say the word!"

"Stabbed!"

She raised one hand between her face and the light, and let it fall to the level of her throat.

"Ah, but he'll see me, just the same. I'm the woman he's paying out." There was a note of cunning in her voice. The captain stared curiously. A grey persistence had filled her face with terror.

"They say there's no hope," he said huskily. "We've done everything possible. He's just asked for you. Will you come?"

She held out her hand, and was led like a child across the surgery. Opening out of it was the



## THE MAN WHO PAID HER OUT

doctor's cabin. He looked up from his bunk and smiled. Someone had brushed the hair back from his forehead, and his shirt was open at the throat. When she saw him, she gave one swift sob of memory and knelt down. Silently the captain stole away.

"Oh, my dear, my dear"—she sobbed, her face pressed against his hand, "you've paid me out in full—in full!"

A smile of unutterable tenderness flashed across his face. She looked up and caught it as it faded.

"My dear, my dear"—and the words were tear-stained, heart-broken things—"I can't live without you! There's nothing in the world—even the other woman——"

Something was suddenly born into his face—a light, a determination. All his reserve force of will shone like a hopeful beacon far out on a black sea. He'd do something for this kneeling woman. He was a man. He'd grip life by the throat, and grow well and strong for her. How dark it was! But somewhere, a thousand miles away, glowed a tiny point of light. He'd get to it—he must—he would. Her last words came to him like two ghosts.

"The other woman?" he repeated. "There isn't another woman—only you. I said that to pay you out."

Her breath quivered.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

“Oh,” she said—“oh!”

He opened his eyes. Something that had been waiting to carry him away hurried out of the cabin, leaving them alone.

Their eyes met.

“You’ll nurse?”—and his voice held a touch of its old gaiety.

“To pay you out!” she whispered, pressing her lips against his hand.



# Beneath the Damask



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## *Beneath the Damask*

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DINNER was in full swing. Above the trails of purple orchids and little oases of silver fruit-dishes, ribbons of polite conversation laced themselves to and fro in an intricate fashion. Now and then staccato notes of laughter rose above the general buzz of conversation, and the deep boom of the men's voices was like the drone of deep-furred bees on a summer afternoon. Silver and cut-glass caught the rays of shaded candle-light, and flashed strange heliographic signals to each other, and behind the backs of the Chippendale chairs a soft, insistent ballet of noiseless footmen, with a gaily tinted pantomime of food and white-hooded bottles, passed restlessly up and down. A Duchess with a tiara smiled indulgently at a playwright with a reputation. An Ambassador with a wrinkled forehead, on which all the monarchs of Europe seemed to have written their Royal signatures, struggled between diplomacy, the *entrées*, and an American heiress. A Society Bishop, with a diminutive wife like a sulky African nut, smiled loosely at the conversation of a worldly woman in spangles, and drew a plan in bread-

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

crumbs of his proposed cathedral extension. Above the hostess's blonde hair her diamonds twinkled fiercely like a bright little town on a yellow desert, while her eyes fled with a species of switchback movement round the circle of her guests, peered for a second at her plate as though it were an oracle, and then went on again. Her husband pricked up his ears at the conversation, and ate with his front teeth, and his laugh was dry and cackling, like the biblical thorns beneath the biblical pot.

Beneath the white, gleaming line of the tablecloth their feet lived, moved, and had their being. Those of the Duchess were perched on the lowest rung of her chair, like two overgrown black satin pigeons. They lost their balance every few minutes, and fell ignominiously into the surf of her Grace's petticoats, only to be twitched back again and elevated to the rung once more.

The size of her Grace's shoes had increased with her Grace's waist measure, and were evolved on lines of pure comfort. They played round between the frills of lace like two happy negro babies, and, somehow, they were such comfortable concerns that her Grace had given up worrying about their dimensions. The feet of the playwright next to her were long and slender, and looked remarkably like their owner's signature. They seemed always to be pointing to a recently dropped epigram, a crumb of five-o'clock muffin, or anything small that

## BENEATH THE DAMASK

graced the carpet of anybody's drawing-room. They were also delicate and intellectual feet, that should have really been used for shaking hands with, feet that one could imagine turning the scented pages of some rare *edition de luxe*, or embroidering strange designs in dim-coloured silks and golden thread.

The Ambassador's feet were like his own despatch-boxes. Somewhat large, but utterly suitable; feet that had the look of being locked to his extremities; feet that one might picture affixing seals to all-important documents or placed for ever on that path of scarlet carpet that cringes its way before the steps of Royalty. Those of the American Heiress were very gay, slightly immoral, sharp at the gold-beaded toe, and utterly scornful at the heel; feet that curved with the subtle knowledge of a bank account, and the assurance of faultless shoes till the end of time. Beyond anything else, the feet of the Bishop were comfortable ones, low and spreading, with a striking similarity to a closely clipped yew hedge. Church militant feet were those of his Lordship, shaped by the Doxology and held together by the thirty-nine articles; feet that were eminently made for a Sunday school picnic and the welcoming of Bands of Hope or the Willing Workers. Those of his wife were simply feet; feet in their boundless utility of expression, their capacity for stamping through country lanes,

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

or the extermination of an inquiring beetle. There were other feet, but devoid of character, for those of the Worldly Woman were secretive on account of their size, and her Host's were simply created for watching, and no other purpose.

While the conversation across the orchids rippled on in concurrent waves of sound, that below the damask whiteness of the cloth kept up an even tenour of its own. The blue-shod feet of the Hostess uncrossed themselves with a polite little sigh.

"You were next us at the opera last night, dears," they said to the feet of the American Heiress, "and we do wonder where you got your clothes. The way those heels were put on was superb, and that little touch of gold was a perfect triumph."

The American feet peered languidly out from the shelter of a fold of lace, with which they coquetted as though it had been a fan.

"We were really too tired to look well," they murmured; "we were twice round the park in the morning, shopping till half-past three, and then on to a garden-party. Such a crush, too, and the damp grass is simply ruination to one's clothes."

"Clothes!" snapped the common-sense feet of the Bishop's Wife. "I'm sick of the word."

"You wouldn't look well without them." The Worldly Woman's feet giggled as they spoke. "Imagine how you'd look in a low-cut sandal."

## BENEATH THE DAMASK

The feet of the Bishop's Wife grew red at the thought, and scratched a chilblain with unnecessary violence. Those of the Duchess fell hurriedly off the rung of the chair, their diamond buckles winking in the half-light.

"Always trying to tread on each other," they said shortly.

"Alas! the way of the world," lamented the feet of the Bishop. "We are warped and crushed from our natural instincts, and our walks in life are not leading, I fear, in the right path."

The feet of the Playwright laughed cynically, and toyed with a dropped napkin.

"Poverty is but a lack of soul," they said. "We were reading something on the library floor only this morning from 'Omar Khayyam,' which struck us as remarkably common sense."

"I adore quotations," lisped the feet of the Hostess. "Do give it to us."

The Duchess's left waggled approval.

"A mere fragment," went on the feet of the Playwright, "that ran something like this:

And if, my friends, the patient foot you press,  
Shall cause you pains that nobody can guess,  
Oh keep on smiling, for you surely know  
The more you squeeze the more shall you look less."

"It sounds foreign and heathenish," continued the feet of the Bishop's Wife, who wore wool stockings and spoke with a Scotch accent.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"It's a sweet thing," sighed the feet of the Hostess, "and we are both so keen on poetry; why, you know, the very toes of our new patent leathers are stuffed with pages from Keats."

"I never could wear ready-made clothes," said the American feet haughtily.

"Naturally not, with a deformed instep," jeered the feet of the Worldly Woman.

"I consider that the price some of you pay for clothes is utterly sinful." The feet of the Bishop boomed out the words like a challenge.

"Fashion could never kiss the Church." The Playwright's feet stretched themselves out into the middle of the circle as they spoke.

"We went on our honeymoon in a pair of elastic sides," announced the feet of the Bishop's Wife. "Comfort and economy is our family motto."

"Do you never look at yourselves in the glass?" demanded the American feet.

"Certainly not," responded the feet of the Bishop's Wife. "Haven't we got better things to do in life?"

"It depends on what one really looks like. Of course, we don't blame you a bit, considering what we have already seen of your figure." The American feet finished up on a note of derision.

There was a momentary silence, and the conversation above the table buzzed on like a flight of insects.



## BENEATH THE DAMASK

"Dears," said the feet of the Hostess, suddenly stretching towards the Host.

His feet woke with a start.

"We beg everybody's pardon," they stammered.

"You haven't been missed," said the American feet.

Someone at the table dropped a roll that circled its way underneath the damask.

The feet of the Duchess closed over it like a trap.

"The first bite we've had to-day. Ever since good manners were a recognized part of Society, we've been on starvation diet."

"To the good old days," said the feet of the Bishop's Wife. "It must have been a scene of terrible debauchery when they threw whole joints of meat beneath the board and poured wine under the table."

"But surely you're old enough to remember that?" The feet of the Worldly Woman absolutely purred.

The feet of the Ambassador broke into a little undiplomatic titter, and were promptly kicked by those of the Bishop. The Hostess's feet gave a Society sob.

"It seems so extraordinary," they said tearfully, "that you never seem content except when you're ripping each other up the insteps. It doesn't matter what one's position is in life, whether it's French heels or elastic sides, someone is always tearing at one for something or other."

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

The feet of the Duchess retired behind a fold of velvet.

"When the conversation has become a little more lively than baby bottles and bedroom slippers I'll come out, but not before." All the feet shuffled uneasily, and those of the Host rubbed themselves affectionately against the extremities of the American Heiress.

"I don't want to make a scandal over anything," hissed the feet of the Bishop's Wife when they detected the movement, "but there are things going on under this table over which my very boots would give tongue."

The feet of the Worldly Woman raced hurriedly from under her gown, and caught the American feet in a devoted attitude against those of the Host.

"Far be it from us to say anything," they said with startling distinctiveness, "but——"

The American feet were stung into retort. "We weren't aware that you were asked to say anything, and the farther you are from us the better we shall be pleased."

The feet of the Hostess crossed themselves angrily.

"An object-lesson in American delicacy," they snapped.

"A bargain in English husbands," retorted the American feet.

"Aye, there's the rub!" quoted the Playwright's

feet. Those of the Duchess peeped out in a massive sort of way, and shook with silent laughter.

"The state of Society," said the feet of the Bishop's wife, with clerical unction, "is too deplorable for words. Married Society especially."

"I had two such charming friends in Paris," chimed in the feet of the Worldly Woman, "and, do you know, they actually married someone with one club foot."

"Things are not always what they seem," said the feet of the Bishop, heavily.

"But my friends knew all the time," insisted the feet of the Worldly Woman.

"That was true love," agreed the American feet.

"'Tis false," said the feet of the Playwright, and his feet and those of the Duchess screamed in combined merriment at the joke.

The feet of the Hostess shuffled restlessly, and wandered towards those of the Ambassador, which happened to be very close indeed. The other feet shrilled and chattered in a high key, but these two pair, who were really devoted to each other, crept away into a sort of little marquee formed by a fold of the tablecloth and made love together. The shining pumps of the Ambassador promptly kissed the mauve shoes of the Hostess right on the instep.

"How beautiful you are looking tonight," his feet whispered. The left foot of the Hostess rubbed one high heel coyly against his embroidered socks.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"And you really love us?" insisted the Hostess's feet. The feet of the Ambassador were voiceless for a moment from sheer emotion.

"We love you," they gasped at length, "as we love a pair of comfortable dancing shoes."

"Oh," said the dubious feet of the Hostess.

"Love you," they went on, "better than the finest silk socks ever made. Better than a mustard bath in winter or a bathing beach without a single stone."

The feet of the Hostess danced a little minuet of delirious pleasure, and then their feet rubbed happily against each other beneath the shelter of the tablecloth.

There came a momentary silence, into which the feet of the Bishop's Wife launched forth again to battle.

"We have just been thinking," they said in an acid voice, pointing themselves like two black badgers towards the American feet, "what a fearfully useless life the average Society woman leads."

The feet of the American Heiress and the Worldly Woman darted simultaneously from behind the ramparts of their petticoats.

"Your day consists of what?" demanded the Worldly Woman's feet.

"My wife's feet lie in the path of parish work," said the Bishop's feet drowsily.

"They can't leave much room for anything else,"

## BENEATH THE DAMASK

retorted the American feet with subdued passion. The feet of the Bishop's Wife turned in at an acute angle, and beat a massive tattoo against the breast of the carpet.

"We saw you once bathing," said the feet of the Duchess, "and we have never forgotten you since." The red modesty of a blush came across the feet of the Bishop's Wife, and covered them like a garment.

"It's the age of *exposé*," murmured the feet of the Playwright. They had gone to sleep under the fallen napkin, and were paying not the slightest attention to the conversation. The feet of the Host at the far end of the table laughed immoderately.

"Do you know," went on the feet of the Duchess, "I think this crowding us together in the twilight is not at all polite and proper." The feet of the Hostess and Ambassador parted with an abrupt movement that might have been borrowed from the Swedish.

"Don't you think it brings us very close together, though?" asked the Hostess's feet, softly.

The feet of the Bishop's Wife whispered suspiciously.

"Considering," said the feet of the Duchess, severely, "that your natural companions are at the far end of the table, and belong to your husband, we cannot quite understand the drift of your conversation."

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"We heard somewhere the other day," said the American feet in a dreamy voice, "that somewhere in the near future they intend lighting the underneath part of the dinner-tables as well as the top."

"Exactly what should have been done years ago," commented the feet of the Bishop's Wife.

"It won't be in your time, anyway," snapped the Ambassador's feet rudely.

"Of course," said the feet of the Duchess, "there are some things one would like to see."

"Certainly," agreed the feet of the Bishop's Wife.

"We did not intimate that they were you," said her Grace's feet, tapping the ground with suppressed passions. "What we meant was that it is not a safe place for the contact of the young."

"And might I ask," demanded the American feet in a dangerous calm, "what you call us?"

"Many things, my dears, but never young," said the feet of the Duchess. The feet of the Host rubbed against the American's in a consoling manner, and silence came over them for a minute.

"All I ever learnt," purred the Worldly Woman's feet, "was picked up under a dinner-table."

"Including your morals," said the feet of the Bishop's Wife, who had been quiet for some time.

The feet of the Hostess dashed into the silence.

"But it's so easy to pick up things."

"A little knowledge is a dangerous thing," said the Bishop's feet. [ 90 ]



## BENEATH THE DAMASK

"But not so dangerous as being pretty under a dinner-table," said the feet of the Worldly Woman, rubbing their mauve satin shoes together in a little sacrament of contented egotism.

"We shouldn't think that you had ever been troubled in that way," said the feet of the Bishop's Wife.

"We didn't know that jealousy always went with elastic-sided boots," said the feet of the Worldly Woman, addressing nobody in particular.

Above the table dinner had gone on in the same vein, only in a slightly lower key. The Bishop's Wife had warred from soup to dessert with the Worldly Woman. The Hostess looked things sweet and unutterable at the Ambassador. The Host had realized that the American Heiress was the girl he really should have married, while the Duchess, conscious of her position, had slapped right and left, and the Bishop vaguely realized that if he had had the dinner all to himself he would have been perfectly happy.

"I'm sure," the feet of the Duchess were saying restlessly, "that dinner's inexcusably long."

"You needn't come again, then," snapped the feet of the Hostess.

One of the Worldly Woman's feet peered out from the edge of the cloth, then hurried back.

"They've almost finished," it announced sleepily.

"There's sure to be music to follow afterwards,"

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

said the despondent feet of the Duchess, who had trodden the fallen roll into crumbs.

"We wish our mistress really knew what you've all been saying," said the feet of the Hostess, with a suppressed sob of rage.

"She never will, so what does it matter?" replied the feet of the American Heiress. "You see, the head can control the feet, but it won't work the other way round."

"How we wish it did!" said the feet of the Bishop's Wife, with a spiteful movement of her petticoat.

"What our mistress wouldn't say to you," said the feet of the Hostess.

"How our master would kick you all out," said the feet of the Host.

But the rest of the conversation was lost in the pushing back of the chairs.



# The Room—A Fantasy



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## *The Room—A Fantasy*

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FASHION leant a little forward from her great, gold-coloured chair.

“We are here,” she said slowly, “to discuss the Mode—the Mode for nineteen-hundred-and-twelve.”

A subdued rustle of importance eddied through the crowd. Two Peacocks unfurled their jewelled tails, and a Silver Fox flashed like a moonbeam that had changed its mind. Fashion clicked the high heels of the smartest shoes ever made, and the silence became complete again. Lounging, standing, crouching at her feet, were all the latest trimmings, fabrics, and animals. Everything that had been worn, and would, in all probability, be worn again. The soul of Chiffon chattered condescending to the Ready-Made Robe. A delicately white Ermine discussed with a saddened Chinchilla the possibilities of intermarrying on a muff or opera-cloak, and a solitary Ostrich was busy cataloguing its best feathers. Everything the heart of woman could desire, and the purse of man could not afford, had flocked to Fashion, and was now awaiting her decree. The shade of Eve had been invited from a sense of sarcasm which is peculiar to Fashion; and

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

the Modern Woman, clad with jealousy as with a garment, huddled at the foot of the great gold chair, taking notes on lingerie. Every few moments, with almost startling regularity, a bitter little cry rose and fell. Fashion instantly hardened under her rouge, the animals shivered, and the Modern Woman went white beneath her pearl powder.

"It is the cry of the Egrets!" exclaimed Fashion irritably. "Will nothing keep them quiet? I have given them a position over everything. They've been crowned on every smart hat and evening headdress. Their price is almost above rubies. I have swished them through every city in Europe, and set them quivering in London and New York. What more do they require?"

Again came the bitter little cry, but this time there were words with it:

"Oh, Fashion of Fashions, Mode of Modes, we are dying beneath the sun! We are bleeding red under the silver moon. Our nests are a hollow-strawed tragedy of dead babes. We do not wish to be worn. We only wish to live."

"Impossible!" And Fashion's voice was as pitiless as the sequin. "I have designed wonderful things for you. In my brain there is a hat of silver lace for which a hundred of you must die. Cry no more! Is not a nest of chiffon softer than river reeds? Death like yours is only decoration."

## THE ROOM—A FANTASY

“Be of good comfort,” cried the Modern Woman. “I will take you to the best houses, and feed you upon violet sachets. You can live in a rosewood cabinet, and a French maid shall dust you with delicacy and a golden whisk.”

The whimpering cry of the Egrets faded away, and the Ostrich strode forward like an aged but determined ballet-dancer.

“And for me—what is there for me? My feathers are like African waterfalls, and the foam of a thousand rivers.”

“Oh,” said the Modern Woman, “don’t ask me anything about it! Fashion decrees. I merely follow. This year you’ve been hopelessly commonplace. Anyway, one of you is not enough on a hat. You’re too natural. Give me purple canaries or green bats. Something to hold up the traffic.”

“I will use you,” murmured Fashion—the Ostrich swung a cable neck of encouragement—“but, honestly, you don’t interest me. It’s just a case of ‘He loves me, he loves me not.’ I pluck your feathers like daisy petals, and you continue to live. Things must die to please the Modern Woman.”

“To please you,” said the Modern Woman, “Fashion makes the laws. I obey from fear of arrest.”

“Lies!” hissed Fashion, with a rattle of her gold châtelaine. “Who accuses me of cruelty?”

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"I do," said the White Hen, coming forward like Mercia in *The Sign of the Cross*. "The pain and injustice I have put up with from you would fill a barn."

"Who is this person?" demanded the Modern Woman, raising diamond-studded lorgnettes. "Beyond allowing her to toil for my breakfast-table, I know nothing about her—absolutely nothing!"

"Indeed!" said the White Hen. "Oh, indeed! And who supplies you with 'feather mounts' and imitation owls? What doesn't modern millinery owe to me? What haven't they dyed, twisted and wired me into? I'm a blessing in disguise; that's what I am."

"You have certainly been useful," said Fashion loftily, "even beyond your eggs. You are a cheap creature, utterly devoid of character. You are honoured above the barnyard—nothing further."

The cry of the Egrets broke out again.

"Can't anyone stop them?" said the Modern Woman angrily. "Supposing they have lost their children, there's no need to cry over it. We live in an up-to-date world. Every creature should learn resignation. I presume you top the class, Eve?"

A faint adjusting of leaves and leopard-skin heralded Eve's first remark.

"The Egrets were one of the first families in Eden"—and her voice was like golden syrup

## THE ROOM—A FANTASY.

running down a spoon—"but their chatter wore me out."

"We wear *them* out now," put in Fashion; "it's only fair. I knew all along they deserved what they got. Now Eve has proved it."

A small animal with variegated stripes of black and white, accompanied by a plumed tail, hurried forward. Fashion sniffed.

"Skunk, what is it? Last year I used you—used you—well, creature, how did I use you?"

"Beyond my wildest dreams," said the Skunk, with a slight lisp. "I started on the fringe of society—skirts and trains—and Easter found me well up in Millinery. What are my chances this year, madam? I served you well; I wore splendidly."

"What once has been can seldom be again." And Fashion's voice was like an oracle.

"Nonsense!" said Chiffon, drawing together her hundred and one shades. "I shall be a friend to duchess and scullery-maid till Time's last pleat. I came here to discuss the Mode for nineteen-hundred-and-twelve, not to sit quietly folded listening to the grievances of moth-inhabited animals."

An Emerald tiara flashed bitterly.

"There's enough talk for an opera-box, and quite as little object. When are we going to the Room?"

"'The Room'?" repeated a new shade of Brocade that had only just been invented, and didn't understand anything. "What is 'The Room'?"

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

Fashion gave a look of pity that was almost equal to an assassination.

"You faint-coloured misery, where do you think I keep my secrets? Hung on the points of stars? In the unlocked cupboards of Twilight? I am half sorry I invented you, little back-seam of unworthiness that you are!"

The Brocade paled to the selvedge.

"It is the Room of Rooms," sighed the Modern Woman. "There we shall find the dead glories of Cleopatra and the tragic folds of Juliet. Marie Antoinette left three pairs of slippers and a petticoat, and I—I have seen the corsets belonging to Noah's wife."

"Every great woman"—and Fashion stood up as she spoke—"every great woman has loved, hated, followed, and run away from me, but she always left something behind. A fan—a satin cloak—gold-threaded stockings—or the embroidered intrigue of a Court train. All these things are locked within the Room. To these I go and spin the Mode—the Mode of nineteen-hundred-and-twelve."

And everything—everybody—followed her, even the Egrets.

\* \* \* \*

Fashion waited till the last little Hook-and-Eye had hurried in, and closed the door with a crash. There were reasons. Paquin—Worth—Virot—Hayward—Lewis might slip in unawares, and the



## THE ROOM—A FANTASY

treasured secret would be stolen. Then she composed herself on a looking-glass Throne, and sipped a goblet of Perfect Reflection.

Conversation buzzed over everything like an insistent bee. A White Fox examined one carefully manicured paw, and began with a short, sharp bark of disdain:

"Whatever happens, I'm safe. Some crazes never change, and I'm one of them."

"Oh, hush!" whispered the Modern Woman. "Here comes Helen of Troy, and she has a perfect genius for drapery."

The shade of Helen moved with opalescent lights.

"Alas for the past!" she wailed; "for the beauty, the grace and the freedom of limb! I will give Fashion a wonderful fold if she will but accept."

"Tight skirts are on the wane," said Fashion, "and I will accept your wonderful fold. Now I would have a Fabric—something strange and exquisite."

Cleopatra, languid in a golden dress, came through the mist. Her very jewels were dead things of a dead century.

"A thousand years ago the moon laid this at my window. It is a fabric of dreams, and I will give it to you because you are Fashion—because I worshipped you in Egypt."

She shook out something softer than thistledown, paler than a weary pearl.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"Who will bring me fur?" There was a little rush of animals. "No—no; not one of you! The world is weary of ermine and sable. I want something new."

A small monkey swung down the Room in long, graceful curves.

"I am quite extraordinary, and my fur wonderful."

"Oh, but you do not know the world!" sobbed the Egrets. "Think of the others! It means death in the creepers, death in the palms, death everywhere!"

"I shall be new and fashionable, even though I am dead," said the Monkey. "I shall lie on a bed of satin and lace, with a jewelled brooch for my collar and a string of sapphires for my chain."

"Vanity!" And the Modern Woman smiled. "Surely Vanity maketh the Mode."

"If Vanity and Death were all!" And the Egrets shivered. "But it's the living on afterwards. Man can kill, but he cannot kill the understanding. We still live on hats, even though we are dead."

"And stoles," murmured the White Fox.

"Opera-coats," said the Ermine.

"Muffs." And the Sable switched an expensive tail.

"You must all blame Fashion." The Modern Woman flung out one arm. "She orders the murder, the suffering and the pain."

## THE ROOM—A FANTASY

"Who wears it?" asked Fashion, leaning from her looking-glass Throne. "Who pays for it?"

"I am strong enough to rebel"—the Modern Woman's voice took on a tinge of the Suffragette—"I will renounce feathers and furs."

"Ah!" said Eve, "I began well enough without them."

Fashion trembled a little where she sat, and narrowed her eyes at the Modern Woman.

"Women have rebelled before!" she hissed.

"Did they die?" asked Eve, adjusting her bonnet of melon-pips.

"They did worse," said Fashion. "They looked frights."

"They did—I won't," said the Modern Woman. "I intend to preach the beauty of simplicity, the emotion of embroidery, the freedom of the fold."

A glad laugh like the ripple of silver bells fluttered the Egrets. They encircled her.

"You will never wear us again?"

"No," she answered.

The Black Fox held out a maimed paw of commendation.

"That," he said, "was done in a trap. You can kiss it, because you are kind."

"Why"—and the Modern Woman turned on the animal circle—"why are you here? You don't honestly want to help the Mode. It's death to you—death and suffering, that's all beginning and no

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

end. It isn't pleasure to be trapped and shot and snared. Why can't you break away from it? What is it you're afraid of?"

"Being unfashionable," said the Seal, with a twenty-fathom sigh.

"Even the animals!" whispered the Modern Woman; and the diamond lorgnettes fell with a glittering crash.

"Well," said Fashion, "what are you going to do?"

"I'll come back to you in a year." And the Modern Woman's voice held a studied insolence.

"Why?" asked Fashion. "Why in a year?"

"To show you I can be smart without battle, murder and sudden death."

Then, with a wave of her jewelled hand, she left the Room.

\* \* \* \*

The Modern Woman hurried down to the World and upstairs to her dressing-room. The Maid appeared like a bit of black-and-white magic.

"I've been a brute for years," announced the Modern Woman. "If I'd gone duck-shooting on a 'Dreadnought' I couldn't have caused more suffering. Get out my furs instantly!"

The rustle of paper and the odour of moth-balls went heavenward like a sacrifice.

"My Sables," said the Modern Woman, writing furiously at her desk, "I donate to the Cats' Home,

## THE ROOM—A FANTASY

though what use they'll be I don't know. Perhaps bits of them can be used for patches after a cat-fight. The Ermine, Marie, goes to my sister, because it's a fur she should never wear with her colouring."

"And the Sealskin coat?" ventured Marie, holding it up so that it gleamed in the light like watered satin. "Who does madam wish to receive the Sealskin?"

"Oh, you can have that. When it's got two new sleeves, the left front, and an entire new back it will be as good as new. Now for my hats: what birds are on them?"

"Owl," began Marie, swinging open the rose-wood cabinet, "Crane, Flamingo, Swallow, Heron, Kingfisher, Humming-Bird, Egret, Blue Jay, Bird of Paradise and five with the Ostrich Plumes."

"Murderess that I am!" gasped the Modern Woman. "I shall never bear the sight of an egg again. Sell them, Marie—every single one. Only keep those with flowers. The dresses now—the ones with fur. I shan't be happy till they're out of the house. The very smell of camphor makes me feel like a ghoul."

"The grey Moiré with Chinchilla"—and the Maid's voice lingered lovingly over the expensive words—"one cerise Chiffon and Black Fox, the old-gold bordered in Skunk, the white Brocade and Ermine, the——"

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"Oh, for the love of Heaven, stop!" shrieked the Modern Woman. "Do you want to drive me mad? I ought to be in prison! Give me a frock with a Dutch neck; this collar's like a rope round my throat. Don't let me find an ounce of fur or feather after six tonight. I'm going to the dress-maker's, or going out of my mind. They're both about the same thing."

The Modern Woman sprang into her motor-car and whirled away to the dressmaker's.

"Never another frock for me with fur," she exclaimed. "Never a single hat that boasts a feather, wing, aigrette or mount. The world of Fashion is nothing more than a torture-chamber. I'm going to break away from all that. You can give me cartloads of hand embroidery, trucks of lace, chiffon, satin, lawn, ribbon, moiré, crêpe, gold tissue, tussore, silk, velvet, brocade, but, once and for all, no feathers or fur."

She ordered accordingly, and, safely embedded in her pearl-grey motor, purred noiselessly home.

"I'll show Fashion," she said, snapping her vanity-case, "that there's one smart woman to whom slaughterhouse hats are not a necessity. And as for furs—consider my eyelashes, how they grow!"

\* \* \* \*

"Well," said the Modern Woman softly to herself, raising the powder-puff, "and so the day has



## THE ROOM—A FANTASY

come at last—the day for Fashion and the Room.”

Suddenly she remembered that a whole year had gone by, and instantly got up a search-party for crows’-feet. She tracked two.

“What a pity,” she murmured, “I can’t paste a little motif of embroidery over them! But, after all, they are only mementos of my great and successful struggle against Fashion and her horrors.”

The dress she wore was white, heavy with embroidered Passion-flowers interlaced between True-Lovers’ knots. An intricate thing, full of cunning tracery and handwork. The hat vied with it in craftsmanship, nodding with delicate muslin flowers half shrouded in a lace veil. She stood up, smoothing away imaginary wrinkles.

“One year with never a feather and never an inch of fur! Just costly simplicity—graceful because it has caused no suffering. At last I am able to show Fashion that death and pain can be eliminated from dress.”

She left the World by a secret stair, and climbed to the Room’s great purple door. One of her ungloved hands beat at the great amethyst knocker. She wore no gloves, and her shoes were white velvet—all for the same reason. Slowly the door swung open, and framed in it at the far end she saw Fashion, grotesque as compared to yesterday, marvellous in anticipation of to-morrow. The

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

wailing cry of the Egrets came out to her like a stealthy, welcoming hand.

"So you have come at last!" And Fashion exposed the emerald heels to her shoes. "You have not been weary of well-doing?"

"See!" said the Modern Woman. "See me as I am, unaided in my beauty by any creature that draws breath. I have laid down my feathers and cast aside my furs. Nothing I wear has cost one moment's pain or suffering."

Eve beat a poppy to pieces dreamily against one hand.

"Nothing caused pain, nothing caused suffering?"

"Nothing!" said the Modern Woman proudly, raising her eyes to the looking-glass Throne.

Then Fashion began her laughter, and the sound of it was passing strange. It held sounds of greetings and farewells. Silk that touched satin, then moved quickly on again; jewels that flashed in the light and grew instantly still; clicking of heels, jangle of gold; touch of fur, soft rasp of opening feathers.

The Modern Woman stared round the Room. Eve turned soft eyes away. The Egrets fluttered from her. A Black Fox snarled at her hand. Everything drew back from the very shadow she threw. And Fashion, watching, laughed.

"What have I done?" demanded the Modern Woman. "What have I done but great and lasting



## THE ROOM—A FANTASY

good? Birds would have died to grace my hats, animals that I might be sheltered from the cold. And yet you turn from me. Fashion, I have a right to know."

And Fashion, who changes things quicker than anyone else, changed the Room. The animals faded out like furry stars, the birds sailed past, mere gorgeous comets, and the glass Throne crumpled together as though it was a little cloud. Only Fashion remained unchanged, hard with a wonderful brilliance, wearing a smile like a diamond.

Then through the shadow of the Room women and girls began to pass. A white-faced child with blood-pricked fingers wept over an embroidery-frame. The Passion-flower she embroidered was spotted minutely in scarlet drops. She passed the Modern Woman with a cry. Half crucified over her machine a seamstress pedalled furiously, and the clicking of it came like the sound of castanets. She, too, went by, but weeping softly—weeping carefully away from the fineness of her work. Shopgirls in black, colourless as dead things, passed on, only pausing to stare into the Modern Woman's eyes. Still they came. All the ones who had crooked their backs, blinded their eyes, stabbed their fingers for her in garrets and cellars—in places even worse than both. Each carried a dress of hers, or a fragment of embroidery. Her white

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

crêpe with the silver wheat lay like a sick child in the arms of a dying woman. The grey linen, stitched and restitched beyond all counting, slashed her across the face as it went by. All this in the half-light. She turned to Fashion, and her voice was like some strange, wild thing.

"It's all your work! It's all by your orders!" she cried hoarsely. "I thought that in saving the animals I saved everybody suffering. Why didn't you tell me? How could I be expected to know?"

The white Passion-flowers on her dress were writhing now—twisting petals, curving stems.

"Who makes me?" asked Fashion.

"Who drives us?" demanded the Modern Woman.

Then she looked up quickly. The phantoms had gone, and only the shade of Eve came through the grey mist.

"Fashion"—and the Modern Woman's voice was a mere whisper—"who are you?" Her last word went out like the flame of a candle.

"Who am I?" said Fashion. "Oh, that is a bold, brave question, that deserves a bold, brave answer. I am wise, yet foolish. Good, yet bad. Right, yet wrong. Shameless, yet modest. False, yet true. Cruel, yet——"

"But"—and the Modern Woman caught impulsively at her hand—"but there must be some way out, some mode capable of rising without suffering and pain for its foundation?"

## THE ROOM — A FANTASY

Fashion smiled like the mother of every epigram. The world awaited her latest extravagance, the Modern Woman her voice. But it was Eve who spoke.

"It all began in Eden," she said softly, "when we were given coats of skins."

"But it must stop! It's got to end!" cried the Modern Woman.

"Ah!" murmured Eve.

"Ah!" whispered Fashion.

And, looking up, the Modern Woman found she was alone in the Room.



R.I.P.



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# R.I.P.

A COMEDY WITH A FINAL TEAR

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“**A**LL new sensations have failed me—even death.”

The old lady, who was throned on the breast of the great state bed, beat impatient fingers up and down on the crimson coverlet as she spoke.

“We are delighted to find you so much better, Mrs. Chandler.”

The wispy little specialist rubbed his hands, that were like two dry leaves, harshly together in a species of autumn sacrament, and gave a cheerless winter smile. The old lady glared at him from beneath her white wig.

“Rubbish!” she snapped. “You and your brother quacks in London consider me and my ailments a professional gold mine, and are only too delighted to find I am still alive to be worked.”

Dr. Peters turned his eyes hastily towards the frescoed ceiling and played with his watch-chain.

“But really, Mrs. Chandler, quite apart from my professional capacity, I have the greatest possible personal regard for you and your welfare.”

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

Mrs. Chandler switched a pair of intensely blue and fierce optics in his direction.

"In fact, you would do anything for me," she growled.

"Certainly, certainly," chirruped little Dr. Peters, gazing abstractedly out of the window, where the traffic of the London street was passing in noiseless pantomime.

The old lady leaned a little forward from the embrace of the lavender-scented pillows, and spoke with more than usual determination.

"Very well, then, I want to die this afternoon." She sank back smiling among the pillows, turning the rings on her fragile, delicate hands round and round, while she watched the shocked face of the doctor with evident enjoyment.

"But, Mrs. Chandler—murder—suicide!" he gasped, roused from his usual callousness and urbanity.

"Not really, you stupid—only pretend."

Dr. Peters emitted a little hissing breath of relief, and sat down weakly by the side of the bed. Mrs. Chandler's smile was almost youthful as she proceeded.

"You see, I really have been very ill indeed."

Here the Doctor nodded emphatically, and took a mental inventory of the medicine bottles on a side table.

"And they all expected me to go out like a candle,



very much like my poor dear husband did thirty years ago."

The Doctor nodded again, and Mrs. Chandler took a sip of champagne, setting down the glass with a steady hand.

"To all intents and purposes, I shall depart this life, and you will have the notices put in the papers, and all the ghastly wreaths shall be sent up here to me, and cuttings from the Society columns, and—" she paused breathlessly to watch the excited promenade of Dr. Peters, who paced the room, wild-eyed and scarlet in the face.

"I won't be party to such an escapade, Madam," he stuttered. "I refuse to link my name with unprofessional outbreaks of foolery. It's utter madness." His voice died away from sheer incapacity to proceed further.

"Mrs. Chandler smiled. When she did smile, even though she was well over seventy and wore a white wig, it was quite easy to understand why, Billy Chandler laid his heart and millions at her feet in the days gone by.

"Peters, don't be a fool!"

Mrs. Chandler had a way of saying the most insulting things and making them seem veritable compliments. The little Doctor flounced from the window and came over to her.

"You never suggest anything without having thought it all out beforehand," he snapped. She

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

smiled again, this time with the complacency of a victory won.

"You can leave for Egypt tomorrow, Dr. Peters."

The Doctor's hard little eyes glistened, and he unwittingly rubbed his hands together.

"Mummies and scarabs," she went on, "will keep you out of the way of the world till the affair blows over, and, of course, I would retain your valued services at your own figure."

Dr. Peters bowed very low, thus intimating to Mrs. Chandler that the said figure would be correspondingly high.

"My gad-about nephew, the only thing I care a scrap about, is yachting in the South Seas, and quite beyond the reach of gossip or telegrams; my servants would all die for me, and, therefore, will have no compunction in pretending that I am dead; I refused to have a nurse ever since I've been ill; and as you had a consultation with no other doctor about my condition (which, by the way, I think was rather selfish of you), there is nobody at all to fear, bribe, or mistrust."

"When would you wish to die, Mrs. Chandler?" Dr. Peters faltered over the words.

"At once," she answered, promptly; "the sooner an old woman's folly begins the more amusement she has out of it. I want all the letters of sympathy, which will, of course, be addressed to my nephew Gerald, sent up here to me. People

couldn't very well write me and say they were sorry to hear I was dead, could they?"

Dr. Peters tittered behind his hand, then his professional frown came into play.

"You are talking a great deal too much," he said, sternly.

"My dear man," responded Mrs. Chandler, with an affectionate shake of her white wig towards him, "till I get all this matter arranged, I shall be restless. Send me the servants."

Dr. Peters blotted himself out of the room like a shadow, and Mrs. Chandler sipped her champagne and talked out into the silence.

"I suppose I may now consider myself dead." She dragged a little gold mirror from under the pillows and surveyed herself critically. "I do look nice," she said softly, with a youthful sigh of coquettish content.

"And after all, what is there left for me to do but die? I am sick of driving, weary of the opera, bored with all the books I read and all the people I see—I should like to know what they really do think of me out in the world, and this is the only way I shall ever find out."

Following a low knock at the door, the line of servants wound itself into the room and stood in a reverent half circle around the bed. The cook was sniffing drearily, and the upper housemaid showed signs of recent tears, while Brent, the butler, held a

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

handkerchief to his eyes. The lady in bed stared at them all, one after the other, and chuckled joyfully. The line of domestics swayed as in a wind. Cook gave a gulp and whispered audibly to the upper housemaid:

"They often goes on like that when they're just a-goin' off. I had an aunt that done it."

"Now, I want you all to attend to me."

The voice from the state bedstead was firm and determined, full of the set purpose of this world and minus the shadowy stillness of the next.

"I'm not really dying at all."

The cook broke out again into half stifled whispers:

"It's a wicked thing as how they don't tell her that her end's a-comin'."

"Our lady is not long for this world," the butler said, in sepulchral tones.

"You're nothing but a pack of whispering fools." Mrs. Chandler sat hastily up in bed, her wig crooked with suppressed emotion and her eyes glaring condemnation at them all.

"I'm only pretending to die, you sillies; and if any one of you breathes a word outside the house about it, I'll discharge you all—yes, every single one of you, without characters."

They filed slowly out of the room, bereft of speech, each one staring fearfully into the dusk of the state bed as he or she went by. When the door

was closed, Mrs. Chandler lay back among the pillows and nearly died—of laughter.

\*   \*   \*   \*

Mrs. Chandler was sipping her morning tea, and the clock on the mantelpiece had just beaten off ten little pert strokes of sound. A cap of white lace sat triumphantly on her white wig, and she herself sat complacent, smiling and youthful, between the gilded pillars of the state bed. Perkins, her maid, had just deposited an armful of morning journals on the red satin coverlet, and was standing waiting to remove the breakfast-tray.

“Perkins,” demanded Mrs. Chandler, as she scooped the sugar from the bottom of her cup with childish delight, “Perkins, have you marked all the notices?”

Perkins, who, despite her disapproval of almost everything her mistress said and did, remained her devoted slave, gave vent to a sniffing, “Yes mum.”

“And, Perkins, were they all nice?”

“Not all, mum.”

“Then give them to me quickly.”

Mrs. Chandler gathered the morning papers into her arms, like a nursery of white children.

“Now, Perkins, leave me. I think I had better be left alone, as I’m going to find out what the world really thinks of me.”

Perkins closed the door with another negative sniff, and silence sank mask-like over the room. The

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

papers rustled into action. Then Mrs. Chandler began to read aloud.

"We regret to announce the death of Mrs. William Chandler, which took place yesterday at her residence, 94, Park Lane." ("Liar," whispered that lady under her breath.) "For half a century she has been a well-known leader in Society, although of late years she entertained but little. Her manner, though somewhat harsh and outspoken"—("Oh, indeed!" tittered Mrs. William Chandler, of Park Lane)—"hid a really kind, sympathetic heart, and her loss will be sincerely mourned by the host of her friends."

She put down the paper and stared out over the tops of her glasses.

"That's a specimen of editorial generosity," she snapped; "after subscribing to that paper for forty solid years, that is what I get now I am dead—harsh and outspoken, am I?"

She dropped the offending journal over the edge of the bed and folded her white, slender hands complacently.

"They have left my reputation alone, but they certainly have made rags of my manners. It never struck me till now that I was ever hard about anything or harsh to anybody. I suppose I am bound to learn a lot about myself now that I am dead. But as for my heart being kind and all the rest of it, why I've known that for years and years."



She picked up the next paper with a sigh, and turned its pages slowly, looking for the marked paragraph.

"This begins better, at any rate," she said, leaning a little forward between the crimson curtains. "This paper was always kind to me, even when I was young and foolish enough to be happy."

"Once again we are called upon to mourn the loss of a delightful personage, whose charms were those of the old school and whose beauty might have only been portrayed by a Reynolds or a Gainsborough. Mrs. William Chandler is dead, and she leaves a vacancy in Society that it will be impossible to fill. There has always been only one Mrs. Chandler in London, and her death must cause the heart-strings of many an aged beau about Town to quiver back to the balls and parties of which she was the brightest star fifty years ago."

She laid down the paper very gently, and groped blindly for her handkerchief, and then for the gold mirror that lived under her pillow.

"I may be old, but I'm still young enough to be vain," she said slowly. "It's all quite true—that paragraph was written by a very young man, I think, who most likely has heard his father or uncle talk of what I used to be."

She lay back among the pillows and watched the morning sun creeping slowly into the room. It stretched forward from the window in a long,

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

golden hand towards the fire that flickered forward to meet it, and then sank tremblingly back again. She began to talk with her eyes half shut and her hands caressing each other slowly, over and over.

"After all, newspaper notices don't count for so very much, and letters of sympathy when you are dead all read exactly the same. Perhaps it doesn't pay to find out what people think of me, and yet I've always wanted to know."

Perkins came noiselessly through the door, doubt in her expression and letters in her hands.

"Please, mum, there's a reporter who wants to know the date of your funeral."

Mrs. Chandler sat up very suddenly.

"Perkins, I can't possibly have one."

"But you're dead, mum."

"Well, silly, can't I be dead in my own house if I like, without having a funeral?"

"I don't think you can, mum."

The face of Perkins was utterly devoid of human sympathy, and Mrs. Chandler sank back among the pillows and gazed fretfully out at the sunshine.

"I'm sure I don't know what's to be done. Send the man away, and say you don't know anything about dates or arrangements."

Perkins, as she departed on her mission of subterfuge, was met in the doorway by Brent, the butler.

"There's enough wreaths and sprays in the hall to do for a whole cemetery," he whispered.



Mrs. Chandler caught the end of the sentence, and clapped her hands softly together.

"Brent, I know it's the flowers; I want 'em all up here."

Then began the strangest ceremony that No. 94 Park Lane had ever witnessed since its foundations were laid—the old lady propped up with pillows, in the great crimson and gold bed, and the butler reading the funeral cards from the countless floral tributes sent up from downstairs.

"Mrs. Lane McCarthy sends a lily and violet cluster, mum, with purple ribbons and 'At Peace' stamped on them in silver letters."

"What perfect impertinence," snorted the old lady; "why the woman hasn't even been asked to dine here, and yet she sends violets and Bible quotations when she thinks I cannot retaliate."

"This fine anchor, mum, has Lord Keith's card attached. As far as I can see, mum, it's white roses and carnations, with a few——"

"Quite enough about that one, Brent," interrupted his mistress: "his lordship always had hopes that I would marry him, and now that he thinks I'm dead he throws the anchor after me."

"There's a small cross from Miss Trewlett, mum, with a card signed, 'From One Who Loved Her'; it's made of white violets and lily of the valley."

Brent held it up for inspection; Mrs. Chandler turned away her eyes and gave three tearful little sniffs.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"Now, that's what I call real honest sympathy, Brent. Somehow, Miss Trewlett always made me feel more than usually fierce, even at the Hospital Board meetings, and I'm afraid I rather snapped at her. But I always had a liking for her, even though I did snap."

"Mrs. Joseph Lanchaster sends orchids, mum."

Brent elevated a chaotic cluster of mauve flowers and ribbons.

"A typical thing of my niece to do. A smart florist, an expensive selection, and an unpaid bill. How she will bless me when she finds out how that will figure in her next flower account."

The room was becoming heavy and breathless with the scent of flowers that covered the floor and streamed over the chairs and divans in clouds of white and delicate purple.

"I can't stand any more of them," gasped Mrs. Chandler. "Brent, you can just keep all the cards, and pile the flowers in the music-room."

In a few minutes the white avalanche had gone, and the old lady was nodding drowsily among her pillows.

"A woman always gets a lot of flowers twice in her lifetime. When she comes out at first, and when she goes out at last."

Her voice trailed off sleepily into silence, but the scent of her funeral flowers filled the room with countless voices and whispers of perfume.

\* \* \* \*

Another morning had come and paid its court to the old lady in the white wig. Perhaps it found her not quite so brisk and youthful, but, still, it found her, nevertheless, and laid down its golden carpet all across her room. It also found Perkins oppressed with a sense of trouble to come, and laden with her mistress's breakfast-tray.

"You sent off all the telegrams?" Mrs. Chandler demanded, drowsily.

"Yes, mum."

"And told all the people on the list to come here at four and meet the lawyer?"

Perkins shuffled uneasily on her feet, and looked dubiously into the shadows of the bed.

"You didn't send any telegram to the lawyer himself, mum."

"I don't want him at all, stupid," said Mrs. Chandler, with a touch of her old fervour, leaning up on her elbow and glaring at her maid.

"But the telegrams said they was to come and meet the lawyer," persisted Perkins in a timid voice.

"They are going to see me instead," snapped Mrs. Chandler.

Perkins retreated hastily and closed the door. The old lady lay back weakly and stared moodily at the sunshine.

"It's not a pleasant thing for an old woman to know that all her relations are only waiting to get

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

at her money. All except that dear boy yachting in the far-off seas. He is fond of me, really. If I had ever had a son, I'd have liked one just like him. But the rest of them that will come, simply racing and falling over themselves to get here this afternoon to see what's been left to them—well, I hate 'em all, and won't leave 'em a penny."

She lay there in the vast loneliness of the state bed thinking about them.

"Not one of them to even so much as come and look at me when they thought I was dead. They'd have sent their empty carriages to my funeral, and have played bridge in their back rooms all the time I was being buried."

Two great, sad, forsaken tears trickled down her wrinkled cheeks, and dropped to the white faces of the pillows.

"But that little Miss Trewlett was nice to send those flowers. Perhaps, after all, I haven't been so hard-mannered and harsh as that paper said I was. Even it added that I had a kind heart."

She dozed nearly all the morning, but roused herself and demanded that Miss Trewlett's cross should be brought from the music-room, and placed where she could see it. At two o'clock she sat up suddenly and asked to be dressed.

"Perkins, I want to look my very best, for this is the last time I'll see any of these harpies of relations. I'm going somewhere abroad, and I

intend to get hold of that dear, good nephew of mine and make him come with me."

Perkins dressed her slowly and painfully in her grey silk, crowned her with the best white wig, and led her to the mirror. She leaned more heavily than usual on her ebony cane, and her step was slow and halting.

"It's all this lying up in bed," she said, peevishly, but when she saw the reflection in the mirror she smiled again.

"Perkins, I simply do not look my age, and there's no use saying I do." She tilted her head from side to side like a happy bird, and shook out the cloudy softness of her skirts. "And now give me that cross which that dear, good-hearted Miss Trewlett sent, and I'm ready to go down."

She had given strictest orders that no one was to be allowed into the music-room till four o'clock.

They were to wait in the blue drawing-room till that hour, and on the stroke of four the doors of the music-room were to be thrown open. She scorned Perkins's assistance down the long, stately length of the stairs, and reached the music-room, breathless but triumphant. The wreaths and sprays were piled white and glistening at the far end. She paused for a moment and looked at them.

"I'm glad I know exactly what my funeral flowers would have been like if I had really died," she said

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

softly, then closed the doors of the music-room and walked slowly down towards the piled-up blossoms.

\* \* \* \*

As the last stroke of four faded away, they all crowded in from the blue drawing-room, discreet, silent, and dressed in deep mourning.

At the far end they saw the piled-up flowers, the massive anchor of Lord Keith's blighted hopes, the hectic orchids and mauve ribbons of Mrs. Joseph Lanchaster, and they also saw the grey satin figure of Mrs. Chandler lying very, very still, with little Miss Trewlett's cross upon her breast.

# The Conformists





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## *The Conformists*

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“**T**HERE is one thing I could never forgive,” said the Poetess, adopting a dim attitude among the grey cushions, “and the one thing is popularity.”

“It would kill me,” said the Poet with conviction, “for it is the murderer of meter—the assassin of style—and I—I would beat it with many rods.”

“Hush,” murmured the Poetess, “I am dreaming of an opal flung by a mermaid into the very heart of the August moon, my hands are deep in a river of apple-blossom seeking for an amb’er soul—the soul of a butterfly.”

The Poet pointed one sandalled foot delicately and flung out a slim hand ringed with blue scarabs.

“And I am building a lotus ship beside a sapphire sea. I have stolen the soft wings of nine white owls for sails and the outline of what never was is draped about the prow.”

“The outline of what never was,” repeated the Poetess; “how delicate—how faintly exquisite. Build on, oh Lover, for I have golden feet and would walk upon your lotus ship.”

They sighed together in complete unison.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"I shall steer it," went on the Poet, "with a shattered emerald and cargo it with Friday dreams."

"Why Friday dreams?" demanded the Poetess irritably. "You have stabbed the breast of my illusion with a week-day. To us who live there are no days. I wear Time in my hair like the jewelled wing of a bird. Last Wednesday is a golden anklet." She softened visibly and touched her middle-aged hair. "Why Friday dreams, my Builder of lotus ships?"

"Friday we met," whispered the Poet, "Friday we wed. Mayhap Friday we will die."

Again they sighed. The long window was open, and from the next garden came the harsh, derisive voice of a gramophone.

Lulu—do, loo,  
Cuddle me down at Kew, Loo;  
We'll get through, Loo,  
    In time to catch the train!  
Screened behind the yew, Loo,  
We'll play at peek-a-boo, Loo,  
So do, Loo, down at Kew,  
    Cuddle me once again!

"That," said the Poetess with her mouth screwed up as though she were sucking acid drops, "that is a popular success. That made money. And I, alas—I cannot sell my sunset dreams for gold. My heart is a faded rose-petal." She leant over a large bowl starred with a solitary twig of apple-blossom. The Poet stroked his tie.

## THE CONFORMISTS

"I have sung many things to the world," he said. "I had a song born at a lark's throat. A song with sighs and a dreary river. It was a wonderful song that held the silver of nightingales. I wrote it with a sob."

"And I," wailed the Poetess, "a verse like a lily lay against my breast, and I have brought it to blossom through my tears."

He came over and kissed her with stale tenderness.

\* \* \* \*

"Why," asked the Poet, shading his face with a Moorish fan, "why, dear soul, have we no potatoes? I am mundane on this opal day of spring. I have stepped down from many ivory steps to be hungry."

"Potatoes," said the Poetess, "will not grow in the ilex groves you wrote of last night. I too wafted a wonderful sonnet on shadows, but it did not bring potatoes."

The Poet made a nymph-like noise in his glass as though it had been some sacred pool.

"We are poor—we are penniless for Art."

"We have sold nothing in six weeks," and the voice of the Poetess was almost shrill. "We are killing ourselves, but it is going to be a very beautiful death."

"I will die for my dreams," and the Poet turned the best side of his profile to the light; "I shall look very white when I am dead, and there will be a

[ 135 ]

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

smile of mystery about my lips. Yes, I will die in the common caverns of hunger rather than pollute my art."

"I shall creep away into the hollow of a Thursday," began the Poetess.

"Why Thursday?" demanded the Poet.

"Thursday, one Thursday long ago you said I moved as silently as a white river."

"That was very long ago," and the Poet bit deep into the Standard Bread; "but you also will die for your art. You will creep away into the hollow of a Thursday——"

"To rest against a humming bird's bosom," said the Poetess settling her coral beads, "and a shrine of lilies will spring up instantly about my feet."

"But you were to rest on a humming bird's bosom a moment ago."

"What does it matter?" said the Poetess irritably. "I shall be slim, pale and unutterably wonderful."

A gramophone chorus from the other garden fell across her last word like a trap.

Mary Ellen, I'm lookin' for a dwellin',  
Where the flowers are sweetly smellin' on their stems,  
And a little patch of melon I'll be tendin' and a-sellin'  
All round Mary Ellen's dwellin' on the Thames.

"If we did that sort of thing," said the Poet, "there would be no need to lie pale and unutterably wonderful."

## THE CONFORMISTS

The Poetess went half rose colour and dropped a side comb. "Whatever happens to us," there was a tremor in her voice, "we will never sink to that. Not even for every first edition of every poet would I descend from my pinnacle. My lips are against the clouds. Would you have it otherwise?"

"No," said the Poet, staring hard, "no, certainly not, but I feel that our lives are closing like a fan of ibis feathers. Closing very softly indeed. I am watching the world through the stems of the twilight grass. I feel faint and cannot remember the names we gave the stars."

"There are no potatoes," murmured the Poetess; "I do not think there will ever be any more. Alas! if I had ought else to offer you save my art."

"We are bound together by a perfect ribbon of suffering," said the Poet.

Once again across the dividing line of garden wall the gramophone proclaimed the popular gospel—

When the apple trees, are pink, dear,  
I'll be with you once again,  
And we'll forget what's gone, dear,  
All the parting and the pain;  
When I take you in my arms, dear;  
You will other things forget  
In remembering I still love you  
As I loved when first we met.

The Poetess sprang towards the window and closed it with a bang. "This afternoon," she said in a numb, cold storage voice that lay very near

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

Ibsen; "this afternoon I shall drape myself with many ebony folds, for Art is dead, and I would mourn for Art."

\* \* \* \*

"Happiness lies across my heart like a flower," said the Poetess as she took the crispest bit of bacon. "I have sold a sonnet, and we shall have potatoes once more."

"Who to? How much for? And what is it about?" asked the Poet, toying with the broken sunrise of his egg.

"That is a secret," and the Poetess looked down with an automatic flush. "My heart is a guarded place for many things. There is nothing so beautiful as a secret. It is the unborn blossom on the vine of discovery."

"If you do not care to share your sonnet I need tell you nothing about mine. I also have sold one; I, too, shall be very mysterious to-day. A bird came to my window this morning and sang me a song of silver, threaded with pearls; but I shall not tell you anything about it."

The Poetess tittered angrily behind her hand.

"'Twas only a sparrow dreary in gloom."

The Poet's eyebrows wandered towards his hair.

"You have a black soul," he said, "and I do not care for you to-day. You have the eyes of an angry moon and the heart of a—a—yes, the heart of a gramophone."



## THE CONFORMISTS

"The heart of a gramophone!" repeated the Poetess. "I shall not see you till shadow time, and perhaps I shall not see you then. I go to write a wonderful sonnet, in which you shall have no share."

When she was gone the Poet opened the window.

Wildly blatant the gramophone's voice rang out again. Instantly the Poet drew in his head and shut down the window. Then he stood quite still, smiled, sighed, blushed a little behind the ears, and opened it again.

"It stabs the dream breast of the morning with many swords, but I will listen to that stabbing. Art—real Art—should shrink from nothing."

The little zinc-like voice, trilled and thrilled—

I want to dream with Dora on the Danube.

"Ah," went on the Poet, "if I could only flirt with Flora at Finchley, a river of pure gold would lie at my feet. I could blot my cheque-book with the twilight star. But I am genuine—I am real. And yet—I have my dreams."

\* \* \* \*

"I lean against my window," murmured the Poetess to herself, "like a scarlet poppy lost in a grey dream. I have eyes of blue brocade, but my husband's behaviour is a black grip about the throat of the day." She lifted a hand like a dank weed towards her hair.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

“How unutterably terrible is the commonness of a gramophone.” Her eyes narrowed into a studied line of tragic horror. “It bruises the bared breast of the beautiful, and I—I sit here lashed with a comic song—”

I want to sail to Girlie Land,  
So fit up a ship for me;  
I'm sick of natives on half a shell,  
They ought to be on my knee.  
I'm not a cannibal, only a mannible—  
Can't you understand?  
I'm quite up to date, and think real estate great  
If I buy it in Girlie Land!

“The man who wrote that,” she said, “no doubt whirls towards a golden sunset in a motor of moon-stones. Veiled virgins in vivid blue wait at villages to strew the ninth petal of every tenth rose under the feet of him who murmured at some little inn of dreams ‘I want to sail to Girlie Land.’ ” She made a spring-cleaning noise in her throat.

\* \* \* \*

A year had gone by, and the Poetess wore a spring-coloured gown, hung from a dreary yoke of embroidered acorns. The Poet possessed a cigar and a double chin.

“We have been very wonderful,” she was saying, “and we have also been very mysterious. You have made gold from the brain. Mystery. I have made gold from the brain. More mystery. We were secret—we are still secret. Money comes to



## THE CONFORMISTS

us in a splendid tide, and we do not question each other."

"My art," said the Poet, "lives beyond all stars, and the moon is a ladder of silver for its white feet. The very gramophone has ceased to worry me—I even like to hear it. It is an angry bee before the closed portals of a yellow rose. My art is that rose. The gramophone shall never kneel at its feasting place of sweets. You are a very wonderful woman, and I am a very wonderful man. Let us listen to the gramophone."

Every Bertie wants a Gertie  
Strolling on the pier;  
Someone to hug in the twilight,  
Snuggle to under the skylight;  
If chairs are dirty, don't get shirty,  
She must use your knee!  
And it's "Say! stay—don't break away  
When you're down by the silvery sea."

"That," said the Poet, with an accent on the first word, "that ought to be popular. It is better than the average song."

The Poetess shuddered. "It is the rough blossom of a coarsened mind."

"I disagree absolutely," and the Poet flushed; "the chorus has a pleasing quality. There is a sea ripple in the words."

"If we are to have——" started the Poetess.

The gramophone began again, and a faint red stole up her withered neck.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

Tell Mama I'm out with Father,  
Say I don't require a key;  
I'm going to show him everything I know—  
What I don't know he'll show me.  
If she wants me on the 'phone, boys,  
There's just one place to call:  
She can ring up Little Willy, at the Circus, Piccadilly:  
I'm with Dad—that's all!

"How delightfully young," murmured the Poetess; "how alluringly vicious. I scent the midnight life of London as though it were a flower."

The Poet gave a theatrical shudder.

"Common," he said; "common as the brown mud on a gray March day. The other song took my fancy."

He threw his head back and half closed his eyes.

"Every Bertie wants a Gertie," he began, and repeated the chorus at full length.

"How did you know it off by heart?" demanded the Poetess. "How can you soil the softening coral of your lips with such a thing?"

The Poet went white—red, and finally retained a healthy pink.

"I wrote it," he stammered. "I've been writing things like that all the year."

The Poetess stood up with a gaping placket. "My heart is torn from me. I am broken on an ivory wheel of terrible moments. I am not dead, but I think you have killed everything in me that was beautiful. My rose of delight is a withered thing." She walked towards the door.

## THE CONFORMISTS

The colour in the Poet's face became fitful.  
"Don't think less of me. I did it for a golden tide."

"At my feet," and the Poetess pointed down, "is  
a river of blood, and the ghost of my happiness is  
sailing by on a dead yesterday."

\* \* \* \*

Someone was singing. The Poet slipped softly  
from his chair and opened the door.

Tell Mama I'm out with Father,  
Say I don't require a key—

trilled the voice. He drew in a sudden breath and  
walked hurriedly down the hall. In the drawing-  
room lay the Poetess, beating a dead daffodil  
against one hand. Her voice trailed away into  
silence.

"What is it, oh, killer of every dream?"

The Poet gave a fat, healthy laugh.

"What is the next line," he asked; "before the  
Piccadilly and Little Willy bit?"

The Poetess turned with a sudden sob towards  
the wall.

"It was for a golden tide I fell from grace. I,  
too, have been doing it in secret all the year. Is  
there a river of blood at your feet?"

The Poet stared down at the Axminster.

"We are very wonderful," he said slowly; "more  
wonderful than the nothing which lies behind the  
world. It is an age of swine, and we have withheld

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

our pearls. We have fed them upon husks. 'Every Bertie wants a Gertie'—'Tell Mama I'm out with Father'——"

The Poetess launched herself at him from the harbour of cushions.

"Tonight," she murmured, "tonight we will be even more wonderful, for we will make a fire of rose leaves, and we will burn our manuscripts in a flame of yellow and silver."

"Not 'Tell Mama' and 'Every Bertie,' " said the Poet anxiously. "Remember the golden tide."

"Not those, my flower—the others——"

And the Poetess dabbed for one tear and caught it.

# The Liar



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## *The Liar*

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AND all my life I have never been able to speak the truth. Perhaps it's something physical. Some curious abnormal development of the brain, or else the brilliant power of invention gone wrong. Life to me has always seemed such a drab colourless thing, and even as a child, I began pinning on to it little glittering sequins of untruth. I lied over lessons and games. Manufactured excuses which were absolutely unnecessary and brought home long, detailed accounts of things that never happened. Then came marriage—a cold, business-like transaction arranged by my mother with feverish energy. Something had to be done with me at once. They must get me out of the house in a hurry to the tune of the Wedding March and the white raining down of rice. The thing comes all back to me now, strong in memories and glowing in natural colours. Mother in mauve and family lace, spasmodically pink and white by turns, with one eyebrow pencilled in with a species of surprised hauteur. Father very gay after the champagne and ready to shake hands with everyone, and the scent of white flowers

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

over everything like a monster hand. Then my husband. Tall, hard, good-looking, smiling at prescribed intervals and holding me by the very point of one elbow as we stood under an enormous floral bell. Even then I lied. About the presents I hadn't had, and the people we didn't ask to the wedding. Swore paste was diamonds, and electroplate solid silver. Launched out on a detailed description of my trousseau, and gave a list of frocks I didn't possess. Changing into my traveling frock, I lied happily on. Mother never tried to stop me. It was my last chance to lie at home, and she let me go on like a child at a Sunday school treat. On the very steps I lied about the car and its guaranteed horse-power. After that everything faded out. Mother was only a waving dot of mauve on the white steps. Father gesticulated with a handkerchief that looked no larger than an orange blossom and a tiny river of rice trickled down among the grey plumes of my hat. My husband held my hand almost mechanically, because he thought it was the correct thing to do. He wanted a woman with a decent figure to sit at the head of his dinner-table, and since my red gold hair suited his dining room walls, he selected me. And he was a doctor. The fact hadn't made much impression where I was concerned. A doctor was something clean and kind who had a dreary waiting room, a vague scent of disinfectant and



## THE LIAR

subscribed by necessity to every magazine published. People came to him for odd minutes and left stray guineas in return. He could be hired strong and reposeful to decorate a death-bed or a birth, for so many stipulated pounds. I liked his hands and the gimlet look in his eyes, also I was tired to death of lying at home. That's why I married him.

"Well," he said, at last, slipping his fingers down my ungloved wrist as though to feel my pulse, "it's all over. The verger will have drunk half his guinea by this time and finished sweeping up the confetti. In some bruised little drawing-room, the vicar will have told his wife how you wore your veil, and by eight o'clock most of the guests will have forgotten everything about our wedding except the champagne."

I allowed the car to purr for a moment like a large, grey cat before answering.

"Are you glad you married me?" I asked abruptly. "Of course, I can quite see you are not the sort of man to wear heavens delight in your boots for any woman. But are you glad?"

"Of course I'm glad," he said, "I married you because you interest me hugely."

"In what way?"

"Professionally," he said.

For about three minutes I didn't hear the car at all. Something rushed through my brain like a whirlpool, carrying mother, father, the church and

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

the wedding cake like autumn leaves before it. Professionally. Then I must be a specimen. Something rare and deeply interesting. If I had died in some poor hospital he could have got me without all the fuss and expense of a fashionable wedding.

"Then that's why you married me?" I managed to say at last, one hand at his pearl necklace that seemed like a rope around my throat.

"Of course, I don't believe in love."

"You don't believe in love?" I repeated. "Why not?"

He turned a little and faced me. The face of the man was made of steel, iron and determination.

"You interested me," he said, ignoring my question, "because you're a born liar. I happen to have views on the subject and wanted to study you. That's why we're married."

Somehow the thing didn't shock me. I even smiled. If I hadn't been a liar he would never have married me. I shouldn't have had his money and his name. Many things went with those two things. Comfort, ease and a sure knowledge of ten thousand a year. It was really worth while being a medical specimen after all.

"How did you find out?" I said in a cool young voice. "I usually do the thing so well nobody detects me. And, of course, you realize it's quite impossible for me to stop. Perhaps it's a lack of

## THE LIAR

mental control. But I can't stand the truth about anything. Such a cold, hard, uncompromising thing. I've got to lie some excitement into it."

"These are all the things I want to know," he said, quietly. "The thing must be treated as a disease and some cure found."

He stopped talking and I stared down at my rings. What a honeymoon. He—my husband—was taking me away as a surgical case. Something to practise on and experiment with. I saw before me days and days of minute cross-examinations. Secret watchings when we were out together; long bendings over me while I slept. Perpetual inquisition that's what it was going to be. My husband wasn't human as far as I was concerned, only a microscope whose strongest lens was turned relentlessly on me. My thoughts seemed to hurry under a triumphal arch, cheering. How important! What did love matter? He couldn't love any woman except medically, and I, his wife, was a feminine museum full of interest. Something he could turn to at the end of the day to study and enjoy. All because I was a liar. Had I really expected love? I didn't know—couldn't tell. Now nothing was expected of me. I could live a perfectly natural life and lie to my heart's content. He'd understand and couldn't possibly find fault because he had only married me to watch my symptoms. Perhaps he'd even write a book. He had

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

written books before. Books other doctors swore by and kept half open on their desks all the year round. It was better than being the heroine of a novel because the thing would be genuinely human. The real me—the woman who couldn't stop lying. Twilight crept into the car and laid its soft grey cheek against mine while beside me, my husband sat stiffly at attention. Did I mind? Did I care? Surely not. No honest man could love a woman who lied. Things were better so. He'd have to be kind and gentle if he wanted to study me and the whole thing was strangely exciting. After all what was love and how many women really attained it? Then my husband began to talk in the half light very softly, and in the kind of voice one uses to a sick child.

"You might tell me, dear, when you first noticed this strange desire. What were the preliminary symptoms?"

And, as his hand sought mine, I smiled.

\* \* \* \*

"Weeks since I have opened this little book, we have been busy, my husband and I, because—well I don't seem to be quite as well as usual. That is the term he uses. Sometimes I laugh hysterically over it and think we are not really living in the world at all, but some wild melodrama that must eventually come to the end of its run. And he's

## THE LIAR

writing a book about me. I knew he would. Coming to see me and dining twice a week, didn't give him enough copy, and so he did the easiest and cheapest thing. He married me. But he isn't a man capable of love. There's iron in his composition and no possible room for tenderness and rose leaves. That's why I'm not jealous of him. Jealous of the smart, delightful women he goes to see, jealous of the slender hands he holds and the soft eyes he looks into. And besides, I haven't got time to be jealous. All the day goes to making clever little lies. Lies that do me absolutely no good, but lies that have to be told just the same. Some women can't help coughing in public, and I can't help telling lies. Perhaps one day I shall be put in prison for it, but that must be after his book is finished. Almost every day he writes something—all the rest of our time together he is watching. . . . Mother came to see me yesterday and I told her. She went away crying. . . . He says the book will make a great sensation, and his name. So why should I care? Besides I'd do a lot for a man who was kind to me, and lying comes so easily."

\* \* \* \*

"I hate to think I've been a fool all these months. It gives me a hot, choking sensation at the back of my throat. Of course, there's been another woman. Even before we were married. And I

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

thought he hadn't it in him to care for anyone! That was because he didn't care for me. How did I find out? Letters. Such a silly, dramatic way. Like something in the Sunday papers or a sixpenny novel. He'd left his desk unlocked and gone out for the day. And they were there. Neatly tied with a faded blue ribbon and one of them holding a pressed purple pansy. . . . At luncheon I read them all. How she loved him! She wasn't ashamed of caring so much. She gloried in it. Told him she was an infinitesimal nothing at his feet and called his slow, determined smile the most beautiful thing in all God's world. It must be wonderful to love a man like that! And, of course, he loves her in return—writes to her—for she mentions his letters. Even quotes from them. But it's nothing to me. He never even pretended adoration for his own wife. I am to make the book and there my duty ends. We didn't bargain with each other for dim delights at twilight and faint, scented kisses of good-bye before he started out on his day's work. Those things belong to the other woman. But oh! how I want to pay him out. Strike to the very roots of his nature, his pride and ambition. He's so sure of himself and his secret love. So sure of me calmly waiting with folded hands for anything he chooses to command."

\* \* \* \*

"I came across these in your desk," I said,  
[ 154 ]



## THE LIAR

quietly, holding them out to him. "I was hunting for a stub pen and they looked so interesting—well I've read them all."

He stared at my outstretched hand, then up into my face. I even smiled a little.

"And what conclusion did you come to when you came to the end of them?"

"That the woman was a fool to care for you," I answered; "but perhaps she likes to be domineered. If ever you experience a really soft and tender moment when away from home, I wish you'd let me know on the telephone."

"Then you don't care?" he tapped the letters with one long finger as they lay in my hand.

"Care," I repeated, "no, of course not. I'm not really your wife, only a patient in this house who must be looked after and fed regularly because she is blessed with an original disease. She tells lies and you are writing a book about her. Keep her warm and take her to the opera, for she's quite a find and is almost sure to make you a famous man."

"And the other woman—the woman who cares?"

"You never gave me a chance to care," I said, turning on him furiously. "On our very honeymoon you explained at length why you'd married me. I was something interesting in the medical line. Had a queer kink in my brain that would make interesting study. And yet you expect me to care about the other woman."

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

He threw the letters on a little silver table with a sigh. The frivolous toys on it rattled and a cupid toppled over on his tiny pedestal. Somehow it seemed to me like a parable.

"And you mean to say," he went on, "that you calmly let a thing of this sort go by unnoticed? Why, if I were a woman——"

"Yes," I said, quickly, "you'd want revenge. Well, perhaps I do, but it's going to be taken in my own way. Don't worry. It won't be on her. She's only a mere passing shadow and has not left the slightest impression."

Then he turned abruptly on his heel and left the room. Perhaps I stood for an hour between the long falling lines of the curtains, staring out at the rain. It seemed one with my life. Dreary, desolate, hopeless, in its steady grief. Time too was like the rain, for the time that lay in front of me was dreary and sad, a thing of perpetual storm and tears. Nothing to do but lie and use my brain for that solitary purpose. Suddenly I thought of the book—the book about me. Half finished now and full of the very soul of my disease. It wasn't a book he was giving to the world, but his wife. All the pity and pain of her at twelve and six per copy. And calmly I'd been letting him go on with it. Every day was "copy." Every mouthful I ate noted down, every remark burrowed into to see if it held one little tell-tale lie. Twelve and six per



## THE LIAR

copy! The butler came noiselessly up to the fire and put on coal. How wise they were to keep me warm till the book was finished.

\* \* \* \*

He stood looking down at the twelve first copies of the book. The publishers had sent it up half an hour before and now the volumes, bright with green and gold, lay in a shining line across his desk. Copies for review were posted everywhere and to-morrow—to-morrow belonged to the critics. It gave me a strange sensation, this seeing of me in print. I couldn't tell the truth, and the woman in the book couldn't tell the truth. But there she was explained in long medical terms, and her brain vivisected on every page.

"It's sure to make a tremendous stir," he said, at last, stroking one volume over and over as though it were a pet animal. "You see there's not another book on the market with such a subject. Lying—a mental Disease." He slowly read the title over. Something in his voice suddenly made me realize that he had finished with me. Got all he could for the book and was letting me slip back into the outer darkness of oblivion. Fame would be his—fame through me. An angry burning flashed over me like lightning.

"You fool," I said slowly. "Oh! you fool!"

He looked quickly up, the book still in his hand.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

Something gray seemed to creep in behind the tan of his skin.

"The book," and his voice failed suddenly.

"All a lie, all one glorious well-thought out lie. Every sensation I described, every symptom I pretended to feel lies, all lies!"

The very room became deathly quiet—listening. My voice went on like the steady insistent note of a violin.

"It's out in the world by now, the reviewers, the shops, the book-stalls, everyone's got it. They'll call you mad, and a fool. Your reputation—why by tomorrow it will have exploded like a bubble. Your wife has done this thing for you. It's a little present from her." Then I began to laugh in a shrill, nervous way, watching the greyness sweep further and further across his face. Yes, revenge was good, and the tired loneliness of my married life died out as I looked at him. He picked up a copy of the book mechanically and began turning its pages over one by one. It fell through his fingers with a little crash.

"You are lying to me now," he said, under his breath, "lying about the book and trying to pay me out for marrying you. The book's true—everything you described to me for it was true."

My feet went softly over the carpet.

"How are you going to find out from a liar?" I asked, then softly closed the door.

Mary Take Care of  
Your Hands



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## *Mary Take Care of Your Hands*

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“**R**EMEMBER your hands Mary—always remember your hands;” then she turned away, gave a little heart broken sigh, and died, her face towards the faded pink roses on the wall paper.

I sat perfectly still—staring, because I had never been alone with death before. What was I supposed to do, and why didn’t her hair change? Something always happened to people when they died. They shrivelled up like a dry leaf and took the first strong wind that blew towards eternity. But Mother did nothing. Down the coverlet that surged across her back like a badly washed snow-drift traced a tiny line of orange pips because she had been eating oranges just before she died. At the foot of the bed lay some magazines with yellow and red covers—she’d been reading. Mechanically I counted the orange pips, then counted them again to be absolutely certain of the number. The coppery notes of a barrel organ danced up and down the street, and the orange pips slipped down

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

the little ravine of coverlet as though longing to dance in unison. Hot sunshine on the floor and one fly buzzing in an exalted key somewhere near the ceiling. Nothing else but the dead woman who studied the wall paper with furious intensity and wore a tiny strap of yellow orange pips across one shoulder. Had she taken a train—bridged the river at one bound, or was she asking some of her fellow-passengers at that very minute to subscribe to her inexpensive funeral? And she hadn't commended me to providence before she went—only said

“Mary always remember your hands.”

There was an indecent hurry about everything connected with her funeral. Two aunts rushed in as though for days they had been waiting round the corner all ready dressed and tearful for the event. Some one rippled down the blinds like rivers of striped cotton, turning the flat a sick jaundiced yellow. A few flowers like stiff white wine glasses on wire stems snowed their way into Mother's room and posed around her face with formal unwillingness. And I took care of my hands. There wasn't anything else to do. The world held nothing but Mother's coffin, cold cream and orange sticks. It was then that the aunts organized a systematic hunting party with me for the game. They hounded me from my washstand on to the cushioned thicket of the sitting room

## MARY TAKE CARE OF YOUR HANDS

divan. From the white tiled peaks of the bath room's safety they drove me forth, and then one afternoon they found me sitting by Mother's side with a nail file. There they left me—saying I was mad. . . . I wanted Mother to see her own funeral because she would have laughed. She only had three treasures in all the world. Hands—eyes—and a sense of humour. The last would have come to her then and grown plump with nourishment. It didn't rain that day—it blazed till the black horses seemed to have broken fragments of rainbow grafted into their skins with the sun striking living topaz from every particle of brass and jet. There was only one carriage and the thing in front that had once been Mother glinting hard and metallic in the sunshine.

On either side of me the aunts rustled in their crepe. Their gloves were too tight and crimped pieces of withered flesh scoloped in and out between the buttons. The black grapes in my hat tinkled every time I moved, till I could stand it no longer. Very slowly I dragged off my hot gloves and began massaging my finger tips. Aunt Loan gave a shrill cough that soared through the dusty heat like a bird.

"Mary you musn't—you really musn't. However can you give attention to your hands when. . . ."

"She told me to," I interrupted, "told me to take



## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

care of my hands, and I'm not going to waste any time about it."

"Hands, indeed," said Aunt Emily, "a lot of good they'll be to you now. You've got to work, child. Take a position somewhere and work with those pink and white hands you're so tremendously proud of."

"I won't work," I said calmly, "never. It's prettier and easier to starve and it doesn't ruin one's fingernails."

"But you've got nothing," they shrilled in unison, "absolutely nothing."

"Except my hands."

And it was then the cemetery flashed through the sun like the upset toys of a baby angel.

So they hid her away in the clay streaked soil that reminded me irresistibly of grease paint when the clergyman flapped the white wings of his surplice, struggling between hay fever and the pathos of the Burial Service. After that we came back to the flat where the aunts fought like two old crows over the glittering remains of Mother's jewellery. Suddenly I remembered there weren't any emery boards in the flat. I went out to buy them.

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"What happened after that," he said. "Tell me." He had taken the ivory tipped brush from his mouth to speak and now put it back again.

## MARY TAKE CARE OF YOUR HANDS

"Happened," I repeated, "Nothing happened. That was the awful part. A woman can always face one tragic incident after the other with a certain amount of bravery, but it's the sitting back in a chair and allowing time to scamper past like a small brown mouse that wears her out in the end. You see I wasn't quite sure if Mother had gone to Heaven or not, so there wasn't any sense in believing everything was for the best."

"And so?" he left the end of the sentence open for me as though it were a little door.

"I just lived for my hands. So many beautiful women in pictures had such appalling ones—hands that even a clever painter couldn't do anything with—that I decided to rent mine."

"Oh," he said, and went on painting.

The big studio was very quiet—even to colouring. Here and there a bit of brass winked with a golden eye on a fold of embroidery, sang a song in a deep booming key, but everything else was dull and well behaved—conscious of the artistic value—pleased in its quiet well mannered way to be there. A fire licked red and coppery lips in the grate, and the scent of fresh flowers, an incredibly old incense, went over and under everything like a ribbon. And I was there for my hands. Half unconsciously I looked down at them as they lay on the satin lap of my gown curved around a rope of pearls. And my hands had been painted onto how many

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

women? I began to count, then stopped. What was it artists and critics said about them—called them at views and private exhibitions. Hands that thought—hands that expressed moods. Did they hold spring flowers and the amber riot of daffodils? Then they sang of the country. Wild birds mad with melody miles up against the April sun. Brooks all silver hurry with impatience towards the sapphire sea. Woods that poured emerald across each hill and touched the very rim of heaven in a swaying cluster of green jewels. And beautiful women had almost everything—except hands. They'd come into studios where I sat and stare anxiously at their unfinished portraits, then turn quickly and stare at my hands. It was a good thing to have a specialty—it made one a necessity. I heard the brushes rattle against his palette.

"Better rest," he said vaguely. "The right hand looks strained."

"I know," I said. "It's been thinking, and that's not professional etiquette. I shall punish it when we get home. Forfeit the cold cream at tea time and thrash it with a rose petal. I can't tolerate insubordinate hands. It's bad enough for a woman to have a heart with that tendency—she doesn't expect it to spread through her entire system."

He laughed, lighting a cigarette with an infinite amount of detail. And as I looked at him some-

## MARY TAKE CARE OF YOUR HANDS

thing flashed across my heart like a rocket. I cared. Cared for this big firm lipped man with blue mutiny instead of eyes and the hair blowing fine gold across his forehead. And it was quite the correct thing for a model to fall in love with the artist. It always happened in short stories and one act plays. But it wouldn't matter to him whether I cared or not. I was only there for one purpose. My hands. I could nibble my heart out during the luncheon hour, but its departure would never be noticed. Men who paid women very seldom loved them. Commercial arrangements were bad for the heart. From the corner of my eye I saw his cigarette comet into the grate, striking infinitesimal red stars as it fell. Little fool, wasn't I? Little fool to care or even think of caring.

"Would you care to dine here one night?" he asked abruptly, "working late I often do."

My hands clapped very very softly because they couldn't help it. Care—well anyway he had used the word.

"Of course—the food at home always frightens me because it's so terribly familiar."

"Home," he repeated. "Where's home?"

"Anywhere a woman keeps her best brushes and a powder puff. Home to me is a small room fenced around with orange sticks and a castle of cold cream built beside a river of Florida water. Home is the place where I look after my hands."

[ 167 ]

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

He came across the studio and stood not looking down, not at me—but them.

“Are you rested?”

I took up the pearl rope, twining it in and out between my fingers. He didn’t care for me—the real woman capable of loving, but for my hands—Mother seemed to ride by on a somersaulting star. “Mary,” she called over her shoulder, “always take care of your hands.”

\* \* \* \*

He held his champagne glass up towards the flicker of the candle light where it shone like a golden flower.

“I don’t want anyone else to paint your hands,” he said. My eyelids fluttered a little at the flowing room, the candle flames, the wine in his glass and lastly at the man himself. Then he must want me—my hands. Womanlike I toyed for a moment with the sensation before taking it to my heart and branding it as my very own. The big compelling man across the table had said it. Nobody else must paint my hands. How nice—how warm—how comfortable. Of course he’d make love to me now—artists always did after saying that sort of thing to models.

“Everybody musn’t paint your hands or they’ll lose their value. I want to be their specialist.”

Something in me reeled and staggered, then went

## MARY TAKE CARE OF YOUR HANDS

crookedly wandering up and down my brain. He loved me—commercially. My hands didn't represent the white twining flowers abloom on a loving woman but things that would bring him money. I shoved my chair back from the table with one long unsteady movement.

"Oh, that's it. I'm to keep them expressly for you."

"Yes," he drawled, narrowing his eyes till they became two narrow slits of intense blue. "That's it."

For no reason at all my head nodded. Then the thing that had been keeping all my words slaves in some secret prison gave way. They rushed at him drunk with freedom.

"And you think you can buy the monopoly of any woman. Hire the young look at the back of her eyes and send her a monthly cheque for the apple-blossom on her cheek. If my hands hadn't cared for you do you think we would have come here at all? What's made the success of half your pictures? My hands. You were putting on the paint and rose colour while they were grafting in the life. And now they must lie idle because you choose to whistle them in at your studio door. Fold themselves listlessly in my lap till you feel disposed to fetter them to the shapeless wrists of some society beauty."

"Then you only came for the money," he rapped out.



## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"Oh you big golden headed liar," I said very softly. "So you can even think that. I came because I cared—cared from the first day I saw you at the Van Eto's exhibition, and now I'm going to go. Funny, isn't it?"

The champagne at my elbow tottered and fell with a little revolutionary crash. The flower vases linked each other's slender waists with silver hands and danced madly round the table while the decanters rocked like distant ships far far out at sea. Everything seemed set in the deep clasp of distance as though it were a jewel. The round table was the moon of a strange burning whiteness and to its edge clung the man like something carved in ebony. His voice rasped through the purring silence—

"And you won't wait to finish the portrait of—"

"I won't wait for anything," I said. "That's the mistake I've made all the time. I've been waiting—waiting for nothing."

Then I looked down at my hands—they were quivering like delicate carvings—carvings on a tombstone.

\* \* \* \*

"I didn't understand," he wrote, "didn't believe you could possibly care for me. Just when I was trying to say something last night you surged out of the room like a white summer storm. And all because I was jealous of your hands. Yes, read



## MARY TAKE CARE OF YOUR HANDS

the word as often as you will, jealous, jealous, jealous. I simply didn't understand because we big creatures are often so appallingly humble. Even now what I want to ask you must of necessity be brutal. Dear Woman of the Shining Hands, will you marry me? Life holds such wonderful secrets that we ought to help each other in finding them. Ask your hands if they will allow you to marry me. If they can stand the heavy pressure of mine on their slenderness, and on their coolness (the coolness of an early white rose I often think) the warm kisses of my lips. And I know what store you set by those hands. Ah, there you were clever, dear. A woman's beautiful hands are the most exquisite things in all the world. Will you droop them into mine and trust me? I dare not send you roses for fear one of their thorns might prick a brilliant ruby at one of your finger tips, and I cannot send you lilies because they are not white enough in comparison. And so I send you my love. Is it a flower?—pluck it then, for it will do you no harm. Is it a bird?—stretch out your hand and make it prisoner, for it has a song to sing against your breast. Is it a man?—then send for him to lay his lover lips against your own."

And what could a woman do but go?

Life for two years has run on like an exquisite coloured river from the very centre of fairyland. I have him—and I have the other. The other who

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

lies all lace and peach blossom pink laughing at the sun she knows but cannot understand. And my hands? Very well, thank you—very well indeed. Perhaps because a baby has been massaging them. Even now, after two years, he says they are like flower petals.

\* \* \* \*

God never intended me to have a quiet, tranquil, life. But He let me think so till a few weeks ago—or was it centuries? I shall not rail, but I can never understand. There was a fire. That's firm, brave fact, isn't it? I'm not trying to make it dramatically charming, am I? A fire that somehow swept across the nursery like a great flaming wing towards peach blossom pink and the tiny life in the bassinette that gurgled to see it come. I dashed towards her, flung her at the hysterical nurse and then—the fire turned on me. It bit me. There's no other word. It ate the lace around my wrists and twined like a golden snake in and out between my fingers. It was so pretty I was powerless. Mother shrieked from a distant star.

"Mary, remember, take care of your hands." while I looked down at it murmuring—"Mother, Mother, isn't it fascinating!"

Then he rushed in and the world dwindled away to the shining head of a black pin. Mother at the far end went round and round like a squirrel in a cage, chanting—

## MARY TAKE CARE OF YOUR HANDS

"Mary—remember take care of your hands," while I kept screaming at the top of my voice:

"Queenie was there with her hair in a braid."

Then everything went up in a rocket on the tail of which hung my baby daughter sucking a sugar stick. After that—nothing. Just plain black full of little holes that didn't let in any light. But people moved behind the black when I was getting better. Odd words soared past it and one day a tremendous silver hand stole over my shoulder and crumpled it up into a little ball, then threw it out of the window. My husband's whisper was like rustling paper.

"And her hands, doctor—her beautiful white hands?"

I *heard* the doctor shake his head. My eyes were wide and I didn't see anything—but I *heard*. Then in another world I saw something else—my husband. Racing downstairs two steps at a time and banging the studio door. He had the face of a plaster cast. The whiteness that goes through and through. He began creeping stealthily round the room like an animal—touching things, fingering the open pages of books, adjusting a rose that had fallen from its earthenware vase. At last he came to the pictures—the pictures of women. They all had unfinished hands. Crude line waiting the perfection of detail—waiting for me? His chin sunk against his tie—(a black tie with little blue spots) and he ran his whole body forward.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"Hands," he whispered. "Hands. My God, I can never finish them now."

After that someone seemed to turn out the lights and I only knew that the doctor was very tall and the bed hot with the scorching wonderment of an individual hell. Two days after, when I was what they called "strong enough to stand the shock," they brought me his letter. Mother was writhing in and out between the brass bed pillars, at the time wailing an endless litany of—

"Mary—remember take care of your hands," but she stopped while I read it. . . . I didn't mind him shooting himself because big men always consider that the only way out of every difficulty. But I minded the lie.

"Dearest," he wrote. "I've got to play the coward because I cannot live to see you suffer and love you too deeply to watch the tortured look behind your eyes when they tell you about your hands. Good Bye."

But it wasn't that. What was it he whispered in the studio. "Hands," he had gasped. "My God, I shall never be able to finish them now."

Then I began to laugh. Not in happy ripples but in shrill harsh notes of derision at life, love, and everything. Nurse came quickly to the bed. Deep in the very heart of my pillow Mother began again—

"Mary—remember take care——"

## MARY TAKE CARE OF YOUR HANDS

"I can't, Mother," I screamed, "I haven't got any hands to take care of."

And she went away never to come back. The souls of good women are never allowed the luxury of wasting time.



Make Up





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## *Make Up*

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THE old man sat up in the bed. Round his narrow hunched shoulders clung a red shawl with woolly and tenacious hands. The room was very still and lighted only by candles. Long, pointed shadows romped across the coverlet—danced up and down the faded bed curtains. Somewhere a nurse rose like a white animated statue and left the room. The old man gave a startled little cough—turned his head from side to side, then opened his eyes and stared at the girl. She was sitting very close to the bed, her hands white and intricate on the pages of a book. She grew from her black gown like a lily. All white and gold with eyes that shone green in the candlelight. One large emerald burnt at her breast—a living, breathing leaf.

“Dying is very dull,” whispered the figure on the bed, “a tedious ballet trimmed with medicine bottles. And the Nurse doesn’t know her steps. It must be awful to be a Nurse, Theo! Such a theatrical profession. Always waiting for a first production or a final exit. Do I look very like

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"Charley's Aunt?" He twitched the red shawl with a thin yellow hand.

"Perhaps you do," said the girl steadily, "but I've never seen the play."

She closed her book—smoothed the lap of her gown, then sat perfectly still. She was wasting none of her reserve force in this room. It wasn't worth it. Grandfather had been dying for weeks—building little convalescent homes along the borderland, then coming back to life at almost prescribed intervals. Old age had no right to flirt with existence. It wasn't fair—wasn't artistic. Somebody strong should appear suddenly and push Grandfather into Eternity. Candlelight—shadows—the aromatic scent of medicine and the old man who looked like Charley's Aunt. The banality of the scene worried her. Approaching Death should be a thing of pomp. Rich music in the dark. Shapes and shadows hurrying into place. Dark crosses—the glow of some wonderful midsummer morning fit for the reception of a soul. But this. . . .!

"I wonder," quavered the voice from the bed, "what will become of you—afterwards. There will be a relief in my funeral because you're awfully tired. You've sat beside me day after day because you thought it was only polite to my will. You know all about that. You've got everything. I'm not leaving it to you because I love you—I never

## MAKE UP

loved anybody, just because you've got that wonderful white face. I hate pink and red women. A white face must take a lot of money to keep it in condition. That's why I am leaving you mine. Theo," and he leant forward on a crooked elbow, "what sort of a woman are you going to be?"

"What sort of woman?" she repeated, "I don't know. Life's a shooting gallery and as yet I haven't selected my target. I can't be good—with my face. A lot of men will love me—I know that—and eventually I shall break my heart over somebody who doesn't care for me at all. No—I can never be a good woman."

"It's going to be hell for you," and his fluttering voice reminded her of the wings of a bird.

"Oh—I expect hell."

"And you are not afraid?"

"A woman only fears two things. Age and her own heart."

He coughed with a hopeless weariness—dabbed in the air and fell back among the pillows.

"It must be a terrible thing to be born with a pure white face."

"It is," she murmured, "I know."

\* \* \* \*

"I'll come immediately," there was the hasty rush of silk and lace. Feet finding the satined harbour of little slippers and her hand on the rasping lock of the door.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

Outside stood the Nurse—polite even in her horror—deft even with the news of death.

“We don’t think he can possibly last much longer—and—and you should be with him. If you can stand it.”

“I can stand anything,” repeated the girl as though the words were a lesson, “anything at all.”

The long corridor reminded her of some place she had utterly forgotten. Death danced at its end. Grandfather was doing a minuet with it. Or perhaps it played hide and seek between the bed curtains. She must be kind to him on account of the will. She must hurry too—because Grandfather hadn’t very much time to spare. He was booked—labelled—for the Hereafter. She drifted into his room like a cloud. At the foot of the bed a tank of oxygen posed like an unused firework. Why did they try to keep him alive? It all cost money—money that must come out of the will—her will. He was sitting up—feverishly bright. He reminded her of something waiting for a Christmas party. Why didn’t he have a tree bright and candle-laden at the back of his head?

“The White Girl,” he murmured, as she stood at the foot of the bed, “She’s come to see her Grandfather accomplish the most noted flying act in history. I’m going out, my dear. Out—like a candle into the dark. Have your breakfast just the same. All the untouched bacon in the world won’t

## MAKE UP

do me the slightest bit of good. Don't cry, because a woman with pink eyes is an abomination. No—I don't want to see a Clergyman. I wouldn't know what to say. Theo—where's your hand? Promise you won't make up—you won't be a pink woman? Powder, but don't paint. Promise me that. All the paint in the world never attracted a decent man yet. I know—I'm very old. The Devil's veins run with expensive rouge. Promise me—promise."

"I promise," she said, "I'm best—white."

The Nurse raised hands as high as she dared. Silence like the ticking of a clock filled the room. The old man gathered the last strength he had in this world.

"Don't make up, Theo. Rouge gets into a woman's system. Makes her see red. And don't see red, Theo. It isn't a good colour. It makes one do extraordinary things. No—you musn't see red. Women go—all funny—devil—quite mad—red."

The Nurse tinkled a glass like some little silver bell. The girl straightened in her chair. Her gown seemed horribly flippant for the occasion. A tea gown. A thing that had swirled its fine lacy edge around the cup of gossip. The vitality of Grandfather! Wonderful. He sat up nursing his past sins. She felt she was under the influence of a drug. Dim—curious.

"Good-bye," he said suddenly, "I'm going out.

[ 183 ]

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

No tears please. It's just the good exit of a bad old man. Theo, don't forget. No rouge—no make-up. The whiteness of you will win you through. Don't be pink, for my sake. You've got enough money to buy pearl powder for years and years and. . . .”

He sat up in the bed—anxious, hurried—clawing at time. He grinned at the Nurse—at the girl.

“Life's a scream,” he said, falling back among the pillows.

“Life,” whispered Theo, “is very still after somebody has died.”

\* \* \* \*

She went to the funeral dimly conscious that her black was the latest sartorial moan in mourning. Alone she drove in his carriage staring from its windows and wondering why ordinary people could be so heartlessly gay. Mechanically she counted wreaths and mourners. Black horses—the hard little clods of earth that rattled down upon his coffin. Grandfather was finished with. She had adapted herself to him and there wasn't that necessity any longer. People called her pale for grief and she raised one hand to touch her cheek. It was good to be dead white at a funeral—it looked appropriate. All his money. She stood beside the half-filled grave looking down. A dull finale for a somewhat brilliant man. Rattling earth and a white-winged Clergyman flapping like



## MAKE UP

a bird. And she wearing nothing else but black! Had she anything to read when she got home—and what would there be for tea? It took an incredibly long time burying a Grandfather. At last people moved. One or two wreaths decided to remain above ground and wilt in the sun. A distant cousin nibbled at her elbow with a black gloved hand. The carriage rattled over the churchyard gravel. She lay back thinking of her face.

\* \* \* \*

“And I want to know exactly what you are going to do with yourself.”

The crepe on the woman rasped as she moved. She was bitter with questions. Her very mourning a legitimate demand to know.

“I shall go away—at once.”

“But you can’t possibly do that by yourself.”

“I can—I intend to.”

The older woman folded her lips like a crease of something incredibly hard.

“But you look much too extraordinary to travel alone.”

“I am quite willing to take the risk.”

Lorgnettes were elevated. Theo with her long green eyes stared almost insolently through their shining barriers.

“You see I have got to go somewhere and be loved almost immediately. I’ve nursed medicine

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

bottles just as long as possible—now I want an antidote. Grandfather told me to hurry away somewhere and look after my skin.” Her Aunt tittered furiously, then snapped her mouth like the beak of a bird.

“And of course that’s all you think of. In a most unhealthy condition—both you and it. I understand girls with colour, but. . . .”

The lorgnettes worked overtime.

“I’m not used to funerals,” said the girl languidly, “do you mind going? I’m rather tired.”

“You,” stammered her Aunt, “will go to the Devil.”

“But,” said Theo with a slight yawn, “I shall always have many happy returns.”

\* \* \*

Abruptly he crossed the deck and dropped into the empty chair beside hers.

“There’s absolutely no use your trying to make a scene or snub me. You can’t get up and walk away because everyone’s staring at you. There isn’t a soul on board big enough to thrash me for my impertinence and so taking all these points into consideration I think we ought to get on very well. Now tell me something about yourself. Who are you and why are you who you are?”

She didn’t answer for a moment but kept her eyes on the sparkling water that danced from one blue hollow into another.

## MAKE UP

"I'm a seagull in disguise," she said at last, "travelling to Europe to buy a new set of feathers. I'm engaged to a merman who at this precise moment is hammering pearls on the bottom of the ship because he knows I'm on it. If you go to the stern you will see all my bridesmaids in white and grey dresses flying after me."

He looked at her with perfect seriousness, then nodded once or twice.

"Of course I know all about that. Your father is that big blue wave and he's terribly busy drawing up the marriage settlements in foam and seaweed."

"And my mother?"

"I think she must have been a very beautiful woman."

"How horribly unromantic," and she laughed, "I thought at least a dewdrop or. . . ."

"Dewdrops never by any chance have waves for their husbands."

"Too deep, I suppose."

"Restless as well."

"And what about dewdrops?"

"Too brilliant—mere morning sparkle and all that kind of thing."

"But," she said slowly, smoothing her cheek, "I'm always at my best in the morning."

"I know that but—but what is it you do to your face?"

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"My face?" she repeated, "oh I know what you mean. Because it's so white. If I tell you you must promise that it never goes any further."

And then without waiting for his answer she went quietly on, "Mama began it all when she put me to sleep in an Easter Lily instead of a cradle. Nurse continued the process by using a white rose petal for a binder. They only allowed me to play in the moonlight, and I ate nothing but white bread, seated on the back of a polar bear who was never allowed to put out its tongue in case I should see red."

"The result is certainly extraordinary—and startling. It's alarming as well. You remind me of a beautiful iceberg wrapped in sables. I suppose your staple diet is snow pudding and frozen cream."

For a moment she didn't answer him, only stared with curious half-closed eyes at blue racing hollows of water as they hurried past. She heard him strike a match and saw the trail of his cigarette smoke flutter out like a little scarf.

"Then you think I shall always be—look so appallingly cold?"

He wasn't a man to her at all now. Merely an oracle she was forcing into speech. Was the one thing she had guarded and guided for years going to play her false? Beside her the man made a sudden movement in his chair.

## MAKE UP

"I'm going to say exactly what I think—for two reasons. First of all because I want to and secondly because you will never believe me. In your desperate effort to cultivate and hold this curious whiteness your mind and passions have become almost colourless as well. Every morning I can imagine you at your White Litany. Each clause of which ends in—'Give us this day our daily paleness.' You can't expect a woman's emotions to work under snow."

"Wasn't there once a princess in a fairy tale who lay cold and asleep until. . . ."

"Until the Prince came all pink satin and masculine abandon to kiss her. Of course there was. I wonder if that's what you need. Suppose I put a pink bow round my neck and try."

She drew quickly away from him and he laughed.

"Afraid even to blush. Heavens, how faithful you are to your face. I tell you a woman ought to be a rainbow, a beautiful gorgeous thing of uncertain pinks and blues. A man wants to look up suddenly and find her at his door changing and flickering like an emerald under sea water. But you. . . ."

There was something almost fierce in his voice and he stopped abruptly.

People passed them—gulls cried and a bugle made sudden and violent war on the golden air.

"Go on," she spoke with almost an effort, "it's always interesting to hear from a man what a woman ought to be."

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"You don't think I'm merely talking for my amusement?"

"Of course not—for mine."

He allowed her words to float past him as though they were so much thistledown. "I'm talking like this because I want to wake you. I wish every word was an ice axe. Something—anything to batter down those white defences of yours. Day after day your heart murmurs—'May I beat a little to-day, Mama?' and you thrashing it with a whip of skin food and a powder puff cry 'Down—back—be still—remember my face and your place.' And it's the same with your eyes. 'Mama—Mama may we look into the heart of a man and know what love really is?' Down come those white curtaining lids of yours. 'Silence, children—silence both of you. A man's love might make you cry for joy. Then where would your beauty be?' Am I right, White Lady?"

"Right?" she held up the word swinging it to and fro as though it were a jewel on a chain, "yes, I suppose you are—in fact, extraordinarily so. You're a man with an x-ray perception. I knew that the moment you sat down. And you thought I was going to be terribly afraid. Defend myself furiously at the possible expense of a wrinkle. Said to yourself—'Here is an ice cold woman that I can give hell to. Flutter her heart—cloud her eyes—hold her hands. I'll teach her, make her, break her



## MAKE UP

into the thing I desire.' But, my dear man, you might as well attempt making toast on the North Pole."

He stood up, flinging away a half-smoked cigarette. "We'll see each other later on and have another chat. You find it interesting?"

"No—exhausting, so I don't think you'd better speak to me again."

"But you can't mean. . . ."

"But I do," and there was a rock-like firmness in her voice, "I've talked far too much—been far too animated—that makes lines."

Dear God, the white mask that was turned up to him from the sables!

"Then you honestly don't want me to speak again?"

"I think," she said, "that it's better so. I must consider my face."

Formally he raised his cap—formally bowed and she watched his tall, broad figure out of sight. . . . She waited one moment—two—then got up quickly and hurried towards her cabin. In it her maid in black played executioner to many dresses in the tall wardrobe, hanging them—mere silken criminals, high in mid air.

"Marie," and the sables fell unheeded to the floor, "I want you to look at my face now—at once. Use the glass."

Through the large porthole streamed the sun in



## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

a great pathway of gold. On this pathway stood the two women while the maid minutely examined her mistress's face. A long, long three moments and then at last—"Perfectly all right Madam, but you must refrain from strong emotions of any kind. Anger for instance, or over excitement. I think a rest before dinner. . . ."

Mistress and maid stepped out of the sunshine as though from a golden boat.

"Yes, I'd better lie down, Marie. A man upset me just now—upset me horribly. But I'm not speaking to him again. Is it time for my massage—shall we try that new cream? It smells of violets, doesn't it?"

Outside the water went by in one blue pageant after another—triumphal procession of sapphire and emerald kings edged in pearls. Overhead a man walked furiously to and fro with a sunk chin and deeply pocketed hands. Inside lay the White Lady like a lily asleep, but smelling ever so faintly of violets. They had used the new cream.

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She held out her hand.

"It was very good of you to come, and very brave of me to ask you. Clergymen always terrify me—ever since I've forgotten how many Sundays come before or after Trinity. Tea?"

With a ripple of pale green and silver draperies she sat down. Beside her the tea table glittered

## MAKE UP

with all the pomp and circumstance of a high altar. She wondered vaguely whether he would bless the macaroons. Opposite, with his fine hands carefully pointed together, the clergyman.

"I wonder," she said, handing tea, "that you weren't nervous of calling on such a worldly person as myself. Honestly I am terribly worldly. I think God forgot to give me a soul."

"And yet you come regularly to Church?" His fine delicate face drooped a little as he spoke. It reminded her of something peacefully beautiful and beautifully Grecian. The clear, cool face on an old coin.

"Oh yes," she said simply, "I come to hear you. My questionable soul is probably still carousing at a night club."

"With your face I don't like to hear you talk like that. There's a horrible incongruity about it. When you come in on Sundays it's exactly as if they were showing a star to its pew."

"I can never live up to that but it's a beautiful compliment. But never think of me as a star—I'm only a glowworm." Quietly he slid his cup on to a little table.

"I suppose," he said, "it's a wicked thing to say, but your face in church is an inspiration. I always preach better when you're there. Give one look at you and then try and put all your beautiful white purity into my sermon."

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

He heard her catch her breath and saw the green brook-like motion of her gown.

"No woman with a face like yours could ever be anything else but pure, tender and true."

Curious how her knees trembled—odd the rattling of the cup as she put it down. "I wish—wish I were all you say and think."

"Anyone can see what you are," and he smiled happily, "read it in your face."

She must end this thing. She put up one hand to her mouth. It was twitching. A pulse over one eye beat furiously. This delicate coin-faced man thought her good. Would her knees ever be still again?

"It is an exquisite thing to have the face and influence of a beautiful woman in a man's life—even if it's only for a little while."

She could stand it no longer. The calm eyed man was playing upon her emotion as though it were a harp.

"I don't think," she managed to say at last, "that I am a good woman. I believe in nothing except myself and my white face. They are the only things I worship. Please let me finish. I came to your Church to learn how to be quiet. Calmness flowed like a river from your pulpit. You never sought to wake men's and women's emotions. I only took my white face to your Church for a rest. All week the Opera had worried it—dining out

## MAKE UP

forced its mouth open—men demanded smiles from it. Late, late at night I used to sit before the glass promising it things as though it were a child. Promised it you and your quiet old church on Sundays if it only behaved all week.”

Something like a grey flag seemed to pass across his face. “What—what is your aim—object in life?”

“To be mistaken for a snowdrift out for a walk,” she said flippantly, “beauty is something one can touch and see while. . . .”

He stopped her with a movement of a fine hand that was purely ecclesiastical. “What about love—purity—charity?”

“Butterflies,” said the White Lady.

Would nothing make him go? She felt she was paying for this scene—paying at so many wrinkles per hour. The thought sickened her. She stood up. Softly she spoke—spoke with an incomparable ease and grace. No bitterness in her voice now—no strident epigrams cutting in and out of her words like knives.

“You can’t do me any good, friend. Not even if you built a cathedral over each of my hands and allowed me to keep gold fish in a font. When a woman dedicates herself to herself—a man—a cause—a thing, all the naval and military guns in the world can’t blow away her belief. So don’t focus Church guns on me—they’re useless.” She held

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

out her hand to him with the angular movement of a mechanical doll.

"I'm sorry to have been such a disappointment to you. It's difficult to hurt a man with a beautiful profile. Good-bye."

He was like a man drowning in deep water. He floundered in the very presence of her. The green and silver gown swept over him with wave-like suddenness. The tea tray—a mere passing ship of silver. He studied her hand for a second and eventually took it between both his own.

"I am sorry—grieved—hurt. . . ."

"I know you are—but you musn't hurt my face, it's all I've got."

Dazed he looked and his walk towards the door was that of a man with imperfect sight. There he paused a moment, then looked back. "Can't I do anything—can't I send. . . ."

"Yes," she said, without raising her eyes, "you can send me my maid."

The Clergyman with the beautiful profile stumbled a little as he closed the door.

\* \* \* \*

Angry feminine voices in the bedroom. Shrill and bitter notes like those of birds in high quarrel and tree-tops.

"I don't believe you, Marie. It was never there yesterday. You're saying that because you hate

## MAKE UP

me. Everyone hates me because I'm beautiful. What's the sense of being like that unless you speak to somebody? Give me the glass and don't chatter so much—my head is splitting."

The maid drew back suddenly like a black cat. Even the lifted action of one hand was feline. Her little eyes snapped and showed green.

"I only said, Madam, that with your complexion a long day in the sun. . . ."

"What do you expect in Cairo except sun? And don't argue. Get me out of these clothes and brush my hair."

Afternoon silence over Cairo. A time of sleep and awnings drooping everywhere like tired lips. Even the huge hotel was strangely quiet. Doors eased gently on their hinges—servants seemed shod with velvet, while the lift went softly up and down like a sigh. But outside the world blazed. In the hotel gardens oranges looked red hot to the touch. Geraniums were a pink, drooping blur, while overhead many palms hung as motionless as though carved in emerald. From this heat she had just come in, leaving a white suited man lingering and longing at the foot of the stairs. His eyes burnt after her like two blue jewels. She thought of them now as the hair fell across her shoulders, almost hiding her face. "Am I never to be allowed to do as I like?" she demanded querulously.

Marie brushed in silence for a moment. "Not



## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

with your complexion, Madam—if you want to keep it. I have been with Madam for five years and understand. It is as much to her as her life.”

“Perhaps—yes—I know, but to-day I wanted to stay out because I was rather happy. It’s a curious thing, Marie, to be happy. It makes you forget you have a complexion at all. I’ll rest for an hour and dress for dinner. Gown—jewels? Green and emeralds. That aigrette I bought in Paris. Tonight I want to look like the branch of some beautiful cool tree.”

She stood up and walked across the room. “Imagine my forgetting my complexion, Marie, even for a moment.”

“You were happy,” said Marie, “you said so.”

“I believe I was,” murmured the White Lady, carefully lying down on the bed.

\* \* \* \*

“And now?” He had pushed away his coffee and little ripples of linen clung round its saucer like shining white waves.

“Now—what?” she asked, intently studying the end of her cigarette, “now I feel cool, well fed, and beautifully at ease. Can you expect a greater declaration from any woman?”

“You might have said you were happy.”

“If I wasn’t happy I shouldn’t be here.”

“What a guarded answer.” He fastened his



burning eyes on her with sudden acuteness, "I wonder if you could always be happy with me?"

She didn't answer for a moment. Over their heads was an alcove of pink geraniums ravished of all colour by the warm tropical night. Between them a little table torched with shaded candles. Little fragments of silver and glass glowed like stars.

"I suppose you want an answer to that?"

"A man usually does."

"Then it *is* a proposal?"

Her voice held a sudden note of triumph, while her hand went out unconsciously to meet the gripping of his.

"I want you," was all he said.

The words thrilled her. She felt strangely primitive—strangely alive. Saw herself dragged through rivers, and across rocks by this man whose eyes burnt into her like flames. Tumult and toil had lost their menace. She would go. Heat and cold were nothing to her now. No longer she retained the desire to be led by still and luxurious waters. She looked into his face—then, and only then did she remember her own. She drew back as if he'd struck her. Still he held her hand and she heard his voice go on like a happy ripple in a dream.

"Two years will soon go, dearest, and then we can get out of this infernal country. The job can't

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

last longer. We'll get away somewhere cool and eat ices all day. Sometimes at work I think my face is the original fiery furnace. We'll have to be careful of yours, little girl. Of course you're bound to brown a bit. . . ."

She gave a little cry that covered the final word. Then regained quick possession of her hand.

"What in Heaven's name's the matter?"

"I can't marry you," she said.

The horror was about her even already. Close to her—on her. She brushed it frantically away like an insect.

"And why not?"

His words struck at her across the table.

"I can't marry you," she repeated dully.

"Who—why?"

"My face," she murmured.

In the silence that followed she saw herself. Brown—bronzed—even blistered. The gold sun bleached from her hair—her face a drawn ochre mask. Two years in Egypt! Quickly she touched her face. What had it done to deserve such purgatory? Two years in Egypt! What a biblical sound it had. The Flight into Egypt—hers out of it. His voice cut suddenly into the silence as fine and sharp as one of his own drills.

"Am I to understand that you refuse me on account of your complexion?" The words sounded farcical in the tropical dark.

## MAKE UP

"I suppose so," she said.

All the battle she'd meant to wage had taken sudden flight. Only she was conscious of being terribly tired. The man said nothing, but in the candlelight she could see him—hear him drumming and drumming like fate on the table with a little spoon. She fought for words—drew them desperately in from the scented night.

"I couldn't get tanned—brown—burnt. I've lived white all my life. It's been my creed, my gospel. The thing I've guarded for years. Don't you see—can't you understand?"

"I understand a very great deal," and his voice was like something hard on a dead level road, "I never knew. . . ."

He brought down his fist with a crash. One of the candles tottered a moment—fell, and went out. She leant back, covering her face with her hands.

"Say something to me—only say something."

Then he leant across the small table, gripping its sides with tense, fierce hands. "Yes I'll say something—say it through clenched teeth. You're not going on juggling with men's hearts and powder puffs for ever. Some day a fellow big and strong enough will brand that white face of yours. . . ."

She was on her feet—staggering—tottering, her hands tearing down dark scented masses of geraniums.

"I'm sorry," he said.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"What for?" she managed to gasp.

"You."

Then he turned on his heel and left her.

For perhaps five minutes she stood perfectly still. Fallen leaves in her hair and a pulp of sweet smelling vines trailing from her fingers. The other candle had gone out and the vacant table was like one left hurriedly by a ghost. Dim—vague—uncertain. What showed on her face—was there a mark already? Leaves and crushed flowers slipped through her fingers. At a little distance the hotel glowed like a long snake gorged with yellow light. She looked at it once—twice. Marie would guard her face—soothe it—keep it beautiful and white. No thought for slinking emerald draperies now. Speed—speed was what she needed. Then she ran as she had never run before. Ran with the ripping sound of brocade, and the crunching of golden heels on gravel. Ran heedless of falling jewelled combs—ran with the fading pink of geranium petals still clinging to her hair.

\* \* \* \*

"What's wrong with me?" she demanded, "you're a doctor and you're supposed to know."

He glanced at her white exquisite face with indolent and admiring eyes. She scented in him a wonderful, physical strength as though it had been a perfume. This man drew her with those eyes and expressive hands. Hands that just now played

## MAKE UP

silent fingered music on a paper knife. The room was still with the stillness of death. A place for the pronunciation of it or a silent scientific battle against it. Calm man—calm books and a calm subdued pattern terrified her of breaking into pattern.

“What are your symptoms—what do you feel? Pain?”

Hands on her heart now.

“It’s here,” she said, “but it isn’t pain. Only a cold clutching thing as if they had locked a dead child to my breast. I’ve been fighting for my beauty all my life. Thought of nothing else. Allowed men who loved me to go because the sun was too hot or the winds too cold. What can you do for me?”

Again he stared at her.

“I believe I could love you,” he said quietly.

For a moment the room spun round her like a top. She saw nothing—heard nothing but the buzzing of some great bee in her ears.

“You can never be cured without love. You’ve starved for years. Closed your heart with barriers of cold cream—drilled out half your humanity with massage. Allowed yourself no genuine emotion for fear of a wrinkle and terrified of drooping lips held yours back from every man. Conversation has been on beauty culture—food according to prescription. You’ve had a mirror for your Deity and the idea of crow’s feet to play the Devil’s part.”

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

He paused and relinquished the paper knife tenderly—like something he was fond of—something that had made personal history.

“We’ve known each other for some time, is it difficult?”

“Not very.”

She formulated the two words beautifully like moulds in which she would pour her speech. And then—“I have always thought you rather attractive.”

“I never knew you thought even that.”

“You never gave me the chance.”

“Do you care?”

“I am very, very interested.”

“Which is an excuse for anything any one doctor ever does.”

“Do you think it’s worth while?”

“I want to get well—that’s all I know or think.”

Her fingers wandered up and down the jewelled stick of her parasol as though it were a musical instrument.

“Then you’ll have to make up.”

She gave one sharp, lyric cry—the cry that had seared its way through pink geraniums and tropical dark. Practically this man had struck her in the face.

“Rouge?” the word went from her like a sigh.

“Exactly. I am trying to drag you round to the normal once more. You can’t go on like this—as



## MAKE UP

you are. The natural cry of a pale woman is to rouge. And the ordinary woman wouldn't face the world as you face it. Chill, bitter iceberg in your beauty. It's the very white of you that's killing you. What do you dream and think of night and day? Pale skin—gossamer fingers. Ivory face and throat."

"Then you suggest what. . . .?"

"An operation," and his eyes met hers, "a simple thing of half an hour's duration that will leave no scar—no mark—no after effects. Can you trust me?"

"Trust you to make me normal once more—as other women are? I hope so."

He stood up quickly and crossing the room took her hands.

"And perhaps after that who knows what may happen. Stranger things than love have come about by operations."

"Then it's my brain?"

"I want you to trust me and not ask questions. And now when shall it be?"

Her face drooped like a white flower in the heat.

"When you like—when you want—tomorrow if you will. Nothing matters very much."

He stooped over and kissed her hands.

At the door she turned. "You musn't think I look pale tomorrow," she said, "I'm always like that. I love it."

\* \* \* \*



## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

She lay perfectly still, the shining ghastliness of the operating table shrouded out of sight. Lay in some lacy thing, fragrant and cool. No instruments flickered in the early morning sun. No white capped Nurse stood at ardent and instant attention. Only the Doctor bent over her—otherwise the room was empty. And very, very delicately he was—rougeing her face. Faint rose colour spread over each cheek—the doctor did it with a sure deftness of touch while under his breath went on a little singing song like the purr of a cat.

“Normal at last and mine to love. Normal at last and mine to love!”

His cool, steady hand arched in her motionless eyebrows with a pencil and touched the still lips into deeper red. Then he drew back. She even smiled. No taut horror of unconsciousness clung to her face. Then very, very faintly she stirred. It was only a mere tremor—the flutter of a leaf in the wind, but it heralded her opening eyes. They too were like leaves uncertain of Summer.

“Over?” she asked, “so soon—it wasn’t long.”

“Nothing ever is if one loves,” he whispered, bending over her.

\* \* \* \*

“And now,” she said, “hand me the mirror. I want to see if what you say is true. No bandages—no mark—no scar.”

## MAKE UP

He came beside her, slipping one arm behind her head. Then she took the mirror and looked into it. Silence. She looked again. Again at her delicately rouged cheeks and pencilled eyes. Once more—searching for her vanished whiteness—the cameo chill of her beauty. And then—the mirror slipped—fell—splintered on the floor. A sudden crunching of glass under his feet. For the last time she gave her lyric cry, piercing and sweet.

“You should have left me white,” she whispered, falling back against his shoulder, “Grandfather left me enough money for that. Rouge and pink women—horrible!”

Hurriedly he placed one hand against her breast—“Heart failure,” he stammered.

“From shock,” sighed the White Lady, falling asleep.



No Ribbon



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## *No Ribbon*

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THE electric lights in her dressing room burned with a hard yellow brilliancy. They refused to wink at the woman before the mirror. They glared—things fiercely bright standing distantly out from the wall on thin curves of tarnished brass. She looked up—counted them—but their number brought nothing to her brain. Then she parted the hair across her forehead with long white fingers and stared again into the glass. In a distant corridor someone was singing with feverish gaiety, but the words were undistinguishable and the tune a ghastly mockery of mirth. The sound crept up to her dressing room, seeming to paw the door like an animal. It was tired and hungry; she must take it in. It was white in the face; she must rouge its cheeks. It was weary to death; she must make it dance. The hands fell away from her hair and she half turned towards the door. On its back hung the tired folds of a dress; at its foot two black shoes posed like monuments of utter lassitude. She ate these details as though they had been food. She drank in the folds of the dress as though they were wine. The

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

boots abruptly reminded her of mushrooms, and she finished her repast with these for a savoury. Finally she held out one unconscious hand as though for the bill. And this was life! The brutal mass of weariness starred with a lip stick and dotted over with the yellow unflinching of electric light. Her eyes found a chair and across that chair lay a petticoat. Very plain at the top, and making a desperate attempt at the foot to be frivolous and alluring in cascades of cheap cotton lace. At the heading of that lace was a beading specially born into the world for a diet of pink or turquoise ribbon. It was empty. The thing fascinated her. She caught at it, laying it in her lap as though it had been a child. No ribbon! What a parable—a farce—a tragedy! No ribbon! Perhaps when she was dead someone would tie little pink bows on her wrists like the girls in the variety shows always wore. She'd sail straight to heaven on those bows. They'd change into a huge pair of peach blossom wings and she'd go on blowing past the stars borne upwards by their unfailing strength. Perhaps they'd even put a huge bow on her coffin as though it were a candy box. Perhaps the very clergyman who emptied the burial service like a little scent bottle of sad perfume over her quiet heart—perhaps even he would wear ribbon in his hair. No man minded looking a fool for a woman—if she were dead! Life was a ribbonless petticoat, and



## NO RIBBON

Fate forced her into the wearing of it. When she came from sleep she found it lying across the chair of everyday. There was no escape. She must wear it until the end—and what was that end going to be? In books actresses died on the tender forgiven breasts of spurned lovers. Crashed over the footlights in some supreme moment of triumph, or fell a tangle of rose brocade and revolver shots, killed by the man she refused to marry. She wouldn't mind that! It was a big, warm, sensational thing to do,—sent one out of the world on a whirlwind of emotion and laid one at God's feet flushed with a resplendent triumph. That would take a woman straight to heaven beautifully trimmed—with ribbon. The empty beading on her Petticoat of Life filled up with warm pleasing little flashes of colour. Abruptly the door handle clicked, and she watched the turning of it steadily. High lights on the black knob broke into countless stars, while a dagger of outside brightness flashed into the little room, although it seemed already filled with light as with a crowd. The blackness of a man's figure filled the doorway.

“You're alone—not waiting for anyone?”

Her hand waved a half circle in answer.

He came in and sat down heavily on a slender chair that complained bitterly beneath his weight.

“We can't go on,” she said suddenly: “we just can't go on. I'm frightened of what's going to

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

happen to us, but I'd rather it happened than this wretched dragging on day after day. It's like a perpetual operation without an anaesthetic. I can't bear the sight of the knives and operating table any longer."

"What's the matter?" He lifted a heavy face—the wreck of something that once she found beautiful.

"No ribbon!" she said.

He looked at her curiously.

"I don't understand."

She fingered the empty beading on the petticoat, conscious his quick mind would grasp the parable. His eyes followed her fingers.

"No ribbon!" she said again.

"Ah!"

The single exclamation cut into the room and instantly became lost. Something was beating the woman before the glass—beating her down. He watched the blows, watched her warding them off. At first her mouth was brave—a red, defensive line, and her wide eyes tearless. The white fortress of her shoulders strong and unshaken. Then came the Past—hungry for the fight. The guns of memory boomed against her breast, their dead child flashed up in a miniature uniform and shot his mother through the heart with a toy pistol. She sat there—a woman besieged. The firmness of her mouth fled from the battle in quivering red, the blue

## NO RIBBON

eyes dashed their regiments away in two large tears, and the white shoulders curved and sank before the storm. She pushed away the grease paint and lip stick, laying her face down on the table, one hand tearing at the feathery softness of the powder puff.

"Why did we marry—why did you ever—?"

He hastily moved on his chair, its woodwork groaning like a thing in agony.

"Then you want to go—free?"

Her shoulders steadied.

"Where to?" she asked slowly. "How?"

Outside in the corridor the call boy went by whistling—shrill, bird-like and terrifyingly young. And they'd whistled once. Her mind followed the boy long after he had passed. Where did he sleep?—what did he think of her?—and why, oh why had he decided to become a call-boy? Suddenly she realized her husband was talking. Saying things that must be stopped and grafted into her understanding. The words would have to be lifted up and patted into something that could be understood.

"I'm not going to keep you tied," he was saying. "You don't want a failure following and weighing you down at every move. If it wasn't for me you'd have done great things ages ago, but people don't want an actress with a husband always in evidence. It's not the thing."

[ 215 ]

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

Colour burnt in her face now like a flag.

"And suppose I ever meet anyone who—"

"That will be quite all right. Go your own way and get all the ribbon you can out of life."

She knew she ought to hold out her hand and say something. Thank him for making it all so easy—so appallingly simple. Words came to the back of her throat, but seemed to stagnate there like a pool of water. She looked across at him, smiling vaguely. What a long time he took to go. The most important thing in all the world was the moment he would stand up and open the door. Everything in her leaned towards that moment as though it were a carnival. Perhaps some strange deity had changed him into stone. If so, she'd have to take him about with her for a mascot. Hanging on a bracelet, swinging in a loop of blue ribbon at the side of her glass.

"How long it takes to say good-bye!" she said at last. "Are you waiting for me to read something out of the prayer-book?"

He stood up. There seemed to be a tired whiteness creeping across his face, blotting out its tan and stealing the blue away from his eyes.

"I wonder!" he began.

But he saw her eyes were staring at the door, and he left without another word.

She sat still for a long time, quiet, unthinking—almost numb. How quiet everything had been.

## NO RIBBON

No drama. They'd even talked badly—used the same words too often and been listless in the formation of their sentences. She'd been too tired to be clever over the thing—too weary to run ribbon into the incident. Mechanically she faced the glass, a stick of carmine blazing between her thumb and first finger like a tiny torch. She was “on her own” now! She repeated the slang expression aloud. “On her own!” To make her personal boundaries and jangle the bells of circumstance as best she might. But the bells must be roped with something. Ribbon! Fragments of sound fluttered into the room like birds. The coarse rustle of scenery, the distant tuning of a violin, the dropping of one solitary seat out in the audience. People were out there waiting for her to act. An expensive woman speaking of expensive things—Love, life and ribbon!

\* \* \* \*

### SHE WRITES IN HER DIARY

I feel that this book with its shabby cover and blotted pages has just been dug up from some graveyard. There are so many dead emotions in it. Now I have two fresh things to give it. . . . a funeral and a wedding. Sit up and beg, little book, at the knee of my gown; then they shall both be yours. I've seen two men wearing black ties during the last two weeks and they seemed to be

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

the only men and the only black ties in all the world. But my husband's tie was all crooked, and since he wouldn't take the trouble to straighten it, and wouldn't turn towards me when I came into the room, the nurse cried and left me alone with him. Even then he didn't speak. Just lay with his hands folded across his breast and the crooked black tie worrying itself up under his pale chin. He looked very happy. Perhaps he'd gone back to the place our first dreams came from—perhaps he was just ordinarily dead. Two weeks after that the other man wearing the black tie hurried me into a church where the silent organ rose up like a family tomb and the clergyman had just come in cold and mouldy from a funeral to marry us. I've married for ribbon! I've had to do that to save myself from becoming a shop-lifter. . . . A woman's existence is after all only a mountain. Love may drag her to the sun-tinted top and bathe her in endless opal colours, or Duty tie her up half way, ordering her to boil the starlight for her husband's dinner. Passion chases her round its side till she stumbles, and at last struggles to her feet, wrinkled and old. In my marriage I ask for no extremes. Give me a comfortable chair at the mountain's base—a chair with cushions and huge ribbon bows. My eyes are to be kept on the level. Love can hurry past, bound for the mountain top with mad, glad young things in his train. I shall not long for an



## NO RIBBON

excursion ticket. Passion's whip can sing across other women's backs, but mine will be protected with cushions, shoulder strapped with ribbon. For I don't love him. Knew I never could when we married. His eyes are blue pieces of the very North Pole itself and his mouth as cold as though he had come straight to me after kissing a snow-drift. But there's ribbon. Little Book—do you know what I mean by ribbon? Warmth and light, clothes and colour, the purr of a great car and the swift feet of servants dancing attendance on an electric bell. The beading of Life is not hungry any more, because I have filled it to the brim with the soft satin things it cried for. But why can't a woman have her heart removed? That's the thing that's going to play me false. Turn on me, shaking and quivering, in some tremendous storm, demanding why I have married him. And a woman's heart is the only thing she can't cheat with an answer. . . . They have just come in to light the lamps, and the room is like the inside of a pink shell. I am in white, and it only needs a man to come, saying I look like a pearl.

\* \* \* \*

A year has gone over me like a great bird—a bird whose rushing wings have littered my life with feathers of gold. But something's gone wrong. Something wrong with the ribbon. Its pattern



## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

wearies me. My husband, like some cold, disinterested salesman, measuring it off by the yard,—he wearies me too. Life now is an endless ballet of eating and dressing up. Sitting stiffly at attention in dining room chairs, angling at a comfortable tilt in motor cars. And this was the ribbon I wanted! Has God packed away the old days in some heavenly trunk and forgotten where He put the key? . . . I wonder if He'd allow me to borrow one small unimportant one, just for an afternoon?

\* \* \* \*

I want the old life back again. The shoes after a rainy day, that crouched in the corner like two muddy rats. I want to be *compelled* to fix up an evening gown on two yards of chiffon and a battered paste buckle. Because the woman—the real, live woman in me is dying, fading out. They give me nothing for my hands to do except turn my rings and snap the clasp of my pearl dog collar. Yesterday I had been looking forward to that for a whole hour, then my maid did it when I wasn't looking. If the autumn wind blows, they hide me in a corner, and when the good grey rain comes sweeping down the street, fires flame everywhere in the house as though by magic. And he watches me with a cold, glittering smile, because he knows. Even enjoys it all! Enjoys it as a cherry tree must enjoy the trapping of some marauding bird caught

## NO RIBBON

among its branches. And I *did* come to steal. Ribbon. All the luxurious yards he could possibly give me. Really I came to his house to shop—not to marry him. Yesterday the whole day was like a log fallen across my breast—just a vast weight of nothing to do pinning me down. The chairs wouldn't let me go,—the cushion feathers gagged me, clinging with stifling tenacity to my mouth. I prayed that God would send a mouse to scamper in unpermitted abandon across the drawingroom carpet. A minute something out of the ordinary, a something that had no right to be there. God evidently hadn't any spare mice, so He sent my husband stalking into the room at half past six. He put his papers on the usual table and poked the fire in the exact corner of the grate he has patronized ever since we were married.

"Had a happy day?" he asked, holding out the poker like a wand of office.

"Oh yes!" and my voice was like a pin, very sharp and bright. "I dirtied five plates at luncheon, and discovered a brand new way of eating chocolates. I'm going to present my teeth with a prize for the discovery. And you?"

"I made money," he said.

"Why don't you ever lose it?" I said desperately. "Why can't you do something that's not a success? Why can't you bring home a failure and lay it once a week in my lap?"

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"And I always thought women liked their husbands to be at the top of the tree!"

"There's no shade at the top of the tree"—and my fingers dug into each other like pink and white spades. "One is simply scorched with success. The sun's a golden coin, and the breeze a hot rustling of dollar bills. We're only well dressed apes leaping up and down on the topmost branch. Every morning I look over the edge of the bed to see if I've grown a tail."

On the mantelpiece bulged a huge figured vase—delighted self-conceit in china—wreathed with fat-faced roses—trailed in ultra expensive birds. The thing seemed to laugh at me, and I sprang at it. Then something cooled my brain. A crash. It lay in the fireplace a mass of ashamed gold and shattered roses. My husband looked at it with steady eyes that eventually lifted and sought mine.

"That vase cost a lot of money."

"Exactly why I broke it!"

The silence that followed came into the room like a white capped nurse soothing and healing wherever it went. That silence reproved the chairs and cushions for worrying me and even attempted to find me the mouse to run across the carpet. I heard my husband crossing the room, but the broken vase in the grate held me fascinated.

"Here's another," he said at last, placing a priceless porcelain bowl between my outstretched

## NO RIBBON

hands. I looked down at its pattern. It was wreathed with ribbon.

\* \* \* \*

I simply can't stop breaking things. The doctors call it nerves and whisper about it outside my door as though someone were lying dead in the room. When I die I want someone to come and break a Crown Derby dinner-service across the end of my coffin. I shall hear the crash of it even in heaven. . . . The luxury of life seems to be winding itself round me like a soft satin snake. It hasn't crushed me to death yet, but it eventually will. Odd for a woman who longed for a life like this to suddenly turn against it! . . . I realize too late that I was intended for an Amazon. A strong battling ship on the sea of life. So Fate has steered me into a dim-lit harbour of ease and moored me to a pink-shaded lamp. . . . I had to get up just now and fling a little Dresden Shepherdess across the room. She smiled too much; wore too much pink and blue. She carried a tiny basket of forget-me-nots when I was thinking of murdering somebody. Didn't she deserve to die?—I can always hear the colour dying on the china I break—My husband wanted to take me out to the jeweller's yesterday—thought and said it would divert my mind, but I told him I'd rather have some blue plates. Isn't it a pity one can't break ribbon? . . .

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

I've just discovered the Dresden Shepherdess has a companion figure—a cherub-faced mannikin playing a fairy's flute. How will he sound when he breaks?

\* \* \* \*

God can't have had any mice, so he sent me a child. A wisp of humanity, large-eyed and terrified. Frightened of its white clothes and the cradle like a meringue the nurse hid it in. It waves infinitesimal hands and cries with the sound of a ring striking the edge of a finger bowl. I can't love it because I don't know how. And I didn't want a child—only the largest Sevres bowl in all the world and a hammer. . . . For days before it came I lay dreaming. Earth was one vast Willow Pattern plate round which I crawled on hands and knees, pinning down the pattern. Above me the stars were inverted cups full of silver tea that refused to pour out. Fragments of broken china fluttered past like butterflies, followed by some angel with a rivet instead of a butterfly net. When my husband came to the bed his eyes were marbles and his tie a twist of sugar candy. At sunset everything flew out of the window. Nurse wore the washstand instead of a cap, while the doctor changed into a black Shetland pony carrying a little bag. Periodically that bag fell open and rained things across the coverlet. Receipted bills, bits of elastic with all the spring gone out of it, Mother's

## NO RIBBON

photograph with a jam stain where her mouth should be, and last of all sleep. Sleep was a grey bonnet with one misty feather and two enormous strings. Two hands stuck out of it on either side like hat pins, and those two hands curved down, placing it gently on my head. A veil with large mauve spots fell across my eyes like a theatre curtain and lastly the two hands tied the enormous strings softly under my chin. Sometimes the bow wasn't quite right, and they worried at me till it was, and once the misty feather grew into a huge grey tree that forced its way right through the roof. That time the doctor motored up its stem and dragged it down again. . . . I have sat up in bed all day and the pillows are terrifyingly large and familiar, while the electric light fixtures seem to have been playing puss-in-the-corner and absolutely altered their positions. Nurse is sitting beside the window and I know by the curve of her back she's thinking about somebody who died. There's something, too, in the curve of my left arm. I tried to remember a little song for it just now, and could only quaver the Floradora Sextette. Nurse buried her dead friend hurriedly under a fold of window curtain and coming over rubbed my left arm. The thing she had, grimaced at me like a funny man on the stage. It should be wearing a red nose and a gigantic pair of false feet. . . . My husband's been reading to me out of a blue novel with little gold



## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

dots all over the cover. What a lot of trouble it must have been to get them perfectly straight! Up in a far corner the grey bonnet with its misty feather is slowly moving towards me like a spider. Bonnet strings are always made of ribbon, aren't they?

\* \* \* \*

And I always thought a child was supposed to bring a woman peace! Thought a child was a spiritual piece of wadding dipped in perfect content that would fill the cavity in her heart and she would hunger and thirst no more! My son is crawling at my feet on the carpet, discovering baby Americas on its sea of pattern. But it means nothing to me. Just something with immature arms and legs that has to grow up on the same principle as a calf. When it gurgles I fail to understand, and when it clutches at my knees I ask myself why it ever came to the house. And my husband always wanted a son. That's his final luxury. The last big bow of gilded successful ribbon on his existence. He's got everything now except my love, and that he could never understand. . . . I suppose some day my son will be a man, whispering over some woman's hand and asking her to marry him. He'll have yards and yards of ribbon to offer her. Ribbon stamped with diamonds and five dollar bills. Ribbon that is just a race track for half a dozen expensive motors; and the woman will



## NO RIBBON

wear all that ribbon triumphantly—for a while. For a while only, because there comes a time in every woman's life when she must have a scrap of black sateen or alpaca to give her a sense of proper values—one can't adjust oneself on ribbon—it's too slippery. . . . I have suddenly discovered that my son has the North Pole eyes of his father. How funny if a baby should freeze to death before a drawingroom fire!

\* \* \* \*

"You're not trying to get well," and the doctor let go my hand. "You seem perfectly content to let life slip through your fingers like a pair of reins. You have everything——"

"That's it!" I said quickly. "I've got everything. There's nothing to keep me alive—no action—no hot spark of life ablaze with doing."

He had a keen face like a kind axe—an axe that might cut a woman down, but solely for her own good.

"A woman in your position——"

"I wasn't always like this. I was friends with real things once. Cold and genuine tiredness. Ambition burnt like a steady electric light. I could do things with my hands and was allowed to feel the good grey rain on my face. Now everything is kept away from me by ribbon."

"Ribbon?"—He took up the word as though it was a little pendant, and held it swaying in mid-air.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"You wouldn't understand, because it's not a medical term," and I even smiled. "Let me go back to my work and worry, the desperate pulling of ends to make them meet, and I'd be a different woman. One who was alive."

"Impossible—there's your husband and the boy."

Something beat over my left eye furiously.

"And you think I care? You who are supposed to read human nature like a book, and sum up its riddles at a glance? You think I care for either of them?"

Then he stood up and left the room whispering, and that whispering was like autumn leaves before a storm.

\* \* \* \*

Something's coming to me—furnishing my brain as though it were an empty room and when all is ready that thing will crash up against me like some huge van whose wheels are grinding circles of overwhelming strength. They've stuck me back in bed again, where I sit stiffly at attention like a little bright-eyed doll. The day is a long stretch of sunshine embroidered in new magazines and meals brought up on trays. At the border of that sunshine skirmishes my husband and my son—what a lot of medicine bottles I shall have to break when I am well again—that's if I ever get the strength to throw them at anything. And how little there is to do lying still! I have counted the satin squares

## NO RIBBON

on the coverlet and the brass bars at the foot of the bed, but the numbers are all wrong. They won't divide or multiply, and I don't know what to do with the three left over. Three blind mice—three brass bars. . . . You can't think of the man who wrote "Three Blind Mice" being married, can you? . . . . What happens to a woman's clothes after she's dead? Does her husband wear one of her petticoats down to the city for remembrance? No—it's rosemary that's for remembrance, not petticoats. Perhaps he'll have my evening dresses cut up for sofa cushions and their crystal embroidery put on a lamp shade. There's the black velvet from Paquin. What a splendid smoking jacket that will make! But the collar and cuffs—how would he trim those? Three blind mice—three brass bars. They'd do—bars for the collar and cuffs, mice for the buttons. Nurse gave me something in a glass half an hour ago and I asked her what was going to become of my clothes.

"But Madam," she said, "you're going to get perfectly strong and well!"

"That's the sort of thing they pay you to say"—and I smiled—"But I've got to know what becomes of my clothes. I suppose my son will use them for theatricals, and—oh! nurse, a woman ought to be allowed one small trunk in her grave. God couldn't object to a dressing gown and an ermine muff. And Nurse, I can't wear white in Heaven

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

unless they allow me a little touch of colour somewhere!"

"You're tired out!" she said, giving the pillows a City Directory touch and putting them in the proper place. "You've got to sleep."

Then I sat up and told her all about the grey bonnet with the enormous strings and my husband came in to hear about it, and lastly the doctor, wearing a carnation he must have stolen from a funeral. . . . They've allowed me to write, although it's almost two in the morning. It's a wonderfully theatrical time, and the room seems built up of scenery. The night nurse has on a dressing gown far too short. She's had it washed—not cleaned, and she's lost one of the tassels from the end of the cord. Perhaps in the room of a dead woman, and was afraid to go back for it. Three blind mice—three brass bars. . . . I wonder what God gives you to sit on in heaven?

\* \* \* \*

I don't understand why all the people are in the room to-day, because it's not an "at home" or anything, and no-one's brought in even a tea-tray. . . . A lot has happened, and it all began when they brought in my son to me this morning. Doctor, do you take cream and—? They brought me my son and in such a dress! A white, wretched thing without a fragment of ribbon, and oh! how kind I

## NO RIBBON

was to my son! But I didn't like his eyes, because they just blinked at me and never smiled. It was then I asked Nurse for some ribbon. And she brought such lots of it. Wide and narrow, pink and blue, yards and yards and yards. I tied a blue sash around his tiny waist, and then he smiled, because he understood the value of ribbon. And nurse smiled, too, murmuring something about my taking an interest in him at last. Each slender wrist must have a knot of colour. One blue, one pink. Three blind mice. But he wasn't a mouse. Once I'd seen a white mouse with a turquoise ribbon around its throat. Perhaps after all my son was a white mouse without a throat ribbon. I'd give him one as a surprise for Nurse. She turned towards the window where one medicine bottle hit another like a new instrument of music, and then—

Three Blind Mice  
Three Brass Bars  
See how they run!

But the ribbon wouldn't run—too loose, too loose. The white mouse I saw had a tight ribbon round its neck. I must pull—pull—pull . . . my son gurgled with pleasure. Pull—pull—pull. Tighter, tighter, tighter. Three blind mice. My son must be blind, too. Then I laughed a little, and called nurse, because I didn't understand—because it wasn't my son—because my son never had a black face. . . . They are allowing me to write in pencil,

[ 231 ]

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

but they won't give me a knife to sharpen it with. . . . I can't find my son anywhere. Possibly he thinks the pillow an arctic hut, and has crawled through it to find the North Pole. I always said his father had North Pole eyes. . . . And they've taken away the ribbon just when I wanted to make a big butterfly bow around my neck. No ribbon! Once before I had no ribbon. . . . What did I want it for? . . . I wish my husband wouldn't cry. Perhaps he's lost some money and feels terribly sorry about it. Shall I put a bow round his neck to cheer him up? . . . But no ribbon—no ribbon. . . .

Three Blind Mice  
Three Brass Bars  
See how they——

Kindly Omit Flowers





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## *Kindly Omit Flowers*

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AND it was all so carefully printed in my funeral notices. "Kindly Omit Flowers." I didn't want them—honestly. When I was alive I couldn't flutter an eyelash without somebody tying an orchid or a purple pad of violets onto it. Couldn't walk down Fifth Avenue without a man stopping me and crucifying a mass of red roses among my sables. Couldn't sit at home waiting for somebody but there came the inevitable rustle of tissue paper in the hall and a man's half apologetic voice saying, "I brought you some flowers." And so, before I died, I decided not to have any more flowers. I wanted to go to what was coming to me slim, straight, white and undecorated. In life it was one of my best effects. Just simplicity of the most expensive kind. But despite my orders you three men made me feel like a leading lady on a first night. I was never sure about death. Of course I knew one stopped having nice meals and dressing up to meet interesting people, but that was all. So I thought one day, (I was looking at a stupid "twisty" brass bit on the car) it would be

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

far better just to lie down as if I was going to sleep and make no fuss over it—not even a boudoir cap. Always thought when people died and went to God He had His own sartorial ideas. That's why I left such heaps of instructions and among them, "kindly omit flowers." I'd like to tell each of you how I died because you were all so desperately fond of me—loved me. My arrival anywhere flooded you with intense excitement and so my entrance to eternity (always a woman's most effective) should interest you far more.

They wouldn't let you in when I was dying. That was stupid. I wanted to stick last impressions on you away in my coffin and look them over when the trees were quiet in the churchyard and the bats weren't doing their everlasting "scooping" under the stars. Yes—I could see you all in the library, but a whole lot of things were going on in my room at the same time. I never looked more wonderful, but they wouldn't let you in.

Flat in the bed and finely cut like the carving on a Venetian tomb. The nurse knew the end was coming so I didn't get as much attention as a "hopeful recovery." And the Doctor—oh my dears, the Doctor! He stood clutching the brass ends of the bed as though he were going to do an acrobatic act. I wondered for a moment if anyone had booked him for the Palace. And then the Thing started to come. It brought me a rose

## KINDLY OMIT FLOWERS

coloured veil first and said, "Lady, it suits you—will you wear it for a little?"

And being just a tiny bit tired and adoring rose colour, I wrapped it round my head. It wasn't for motoring or anything like that, but more for the Opera. It had little songs hidden away in it and somehow under my left ear seemed to be a soft, soft tinkling bell. And then the Thing brought me something purple, but didn't ask for instructions. Just wrapped it softly round my head and the rose coloured veil died away like a whisper. And through that purple I could see you all—waiting in the library. Ken was sobbing into a yellow cushion, a touching but ridiculous colour scheme. Billy stood staring at the mantelpiece as though he could see right through to the Battery, and Simmy—Simmy was almost funny. They'd left an old kimona of mine on a chair and he was patting the embroidered storks on it over and over whispering, "Keep her alive—you've walked so much with her—don't let her lie down for good." Fancy seeing all this through doors and a purple veil! Then the Thing came to me again and said, "Lady, I don't think you care so very much about purple, what about a dark, dark grey?"

And then exactly like a woman who's tired shopping, I said, "Suppose if you haven't anything else, I'll have to take that." I might have been an Egyptian princess for what the Thing did to me.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

It started at my feet and when it reached my eyes I knew I would be dead. As the folds kept coming closer and closer I began a sort of a litany.

"What will they do with the medicine bottles—Hope the Doctor doesn't have to wait for his money—Does Billy remember his appointment on Wednesday—What did I do with my rings—Is the nurse honest?"

By the time the grey folds had reached my chin, I fought desperately to see more of the library. But you three began to grow hazy. Ken's head in the yellow cushion looked like a distorted daffodil. Billy was still hunting for the Battery but had his head in his hands, and Simmy walking up and down stamping the red dragon's deeper and deeper into the carpet. Then the last fold of grey came over my eyes and the Thing began to talk very softly.

"Lady, it is time to rest. You have been a beautiful lady and a wonderful lady, and a lot of men's hearts are making a cushion under your head while you go to sleep. You take with you a million memories and a million perfumes—colours uncountable. And so as I draw this little fold of grey nothing over your eyes, be content—rest."

That, dear people in the library—that is how I died.

\* \* \* \*

Ken dear, I knew perfectly well you couldn't make what the newspapers call a "floral tribute" by

## KINDLY OMIT FLOWERS

yourself. Your efforts were the sweetest thing in my death. You see I went by sheer feminine perversity, with you all, when you were buying my funeral flowers—despite the “please omit” notice you never paid any attention to. Ken dear, you never had any money—you never will have and so you did the artistic thing. You tried to do something for my coffin with those long slim crazy hands of yours. You bought a spool of thin wire, four lilies and a bunch of green stuff. Wonderful possibilities. But silly kid, they didn’t materialize. The lilies broke off short because you couldn’t see through your tears and the wire got all tangled up and the green stuff snapped each time you bent it and then—you pushed the white and emerald wreckage away and sobbed with your head in your arms.

“Even the last thing I try to do for her goes all wrong.”

Then after a little while you looked at the chaos of petals and leaves and said to yourself.

“It doesn’t matter so very much. She’ll know what I tried to do for her. It will get to her even down there in her grave.”

Then you opened that stupid little window of yours (we always meant to get it mended but never did) and threw everything green and white into the night. After that you went and bought me a bunch of violets. Fifty cents. Silly kid—you

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

couldn't afford even that. They were placed very, very close to my heart and I felt that somebody had given me a gigantic amethyst to serve as a passport to Heaven. They have the fifty-seven varieties of jewels for foundation stones so you know how glad I was. I could tell you lots but there isn't time. I'm so busy in my grave, sorting emotions and memories as though they were coloured silks and putting them in their right compartments. Dear, I couldn't love you in the way you wanted, but I loved you for your beautiful thoughts and the terrible pictures nobody cared to buy. I had imaginary relations in the West they used to go to but honestly, they're all put away at the top of the house. Thank you, dear, for all you tried to do with your lilies and a little bunch of green. Come and see me sometimes. I'm not what they call actually dead in your world. You've got those blue tunnelling eyes that can pierce through any amount of coffin board and red clay. Just because a woman is called upon to fold her hands and lie quiet where the grass does its manufacturing business it doesn't mean she has lost interest in the men who loved her. Come and see me—talk to me. Sit at my feet and smile, and when a rose bush or something else on my grave is waving in the wind, you'll know I'm answering you.

\* \* \* \*



## KINDLY OMIT FLOWERS

Simmy, I knew you'd do it with orchids! The big floppy kind that look as though they were blown together with violet breath and tobacco smoke. Your only trouble was the girl who designed my wreath. She looked as if she was carrying a five cents worth look of me behind her eyes and it rather upset you. Simmy, I couldn't have married you—you'd too much money—money was the thing that kept squashing the best part out of you all day long. If you had a wonderful idea a limousine raced after it like a trained cat and caught it. If I asked for simple bread and cheese sometimes when we went out, you whistled a large sized lobster sauced to the eyes up to the table and spoilt it all. Even a woman in emeralds is sometimes crying for a little bit of bread and cheese. Simmy, that's perfectly true. A woman doesn't cling to one atmosphere like a trained ape. She swings and swings far wider than that. Sometimes she misses one of the rings—wedding—acrobatic or otherwise, but it isn't so very often. We would have looked wonderful together—types that come out best in the worst newspapers, but there it would have ended. I'd have fought each inch of the road with you from tooth-brush to pearl dog collar. And it wasn't worth it. A woman is often unfortunate enough to resist a man's garage with a little one of her own. That was my case. Two cars, Simmy, and heaven alone knows how many you had. But

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

your friendship's just like the sweetest of sweet things.

It's going through my hair as I write—no, that's wrong, as I breathe—that's out too, but as I do whatever women in their graves are doing for the men who loved them. Simmy, I have the power to follow you anywhere—even that terrible corner café you sometimes go to—Venice all gone wrong in stained glass windows and the Bridge of Sighs spanning the bottles in shiny oak and little pieces of looking glass. Life is so full of nice things for you that you'd have died of indigestion if you didn't get your contrasts. Strong ones—sawdust floors and a nodding acquaintance with what our set calls "the people." I can't realize I'm out of it—at least not yet. Just at the moment the thing I'm missing most is the telephone. You remember the one in the boudoir that Marie Antoinette stood over with bulging brocaded skirts. God how light and frivolous we were! You used to say she bulged because she was stuffed with my secrets and her hair shocked white by my confidences on the wire. Simmy, if you ever fall in love with a woman, don't telephone to her very, very much. It's never the same to her as a scrap of paper with something sweet written on it, or a hurried moment together. No woman likes her love roses mixed up with her order for cutlets or another ton of coal. Not much more, dear gay irresponsible heart. Don't go on a

## KINDLY OMIT FLOWERS

midnight frolic and find yourself at your wedding breakfast. She's bound to come. God doesn't make men like you to motor their lonely way through the world. He never made real selfishness in anyone. You're sure to find her somewhere in the maddened tangle of it all and when you do bring her to see me and say,

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, she went so soon, because you two would have loved each other."

You'll find in my will she's been left the emerald ring that used to look as if I'd been dipping my little finger in *creme de menthe*. Bless you, dear. Dead women's blessings have a ten fold value but I've only just found that out.

\* \* \* \*

I knew you'd cry yourself absolutely ill. Knew the blinds in that wonderful flat of yours would stay down for weeks—that you wouldn't eat and couldn't sleep, but just keep prowling from one room to another touching little things that couldn't possibly matter and quivering every time a bell rang. And the photograph of me on the piano! I knew, too, you'd carry it about with you as though it were a dog. And then my funeral flowers—the ones you were kindly requested to omit. Nothing from a shop for you—nothing that anybody else had ever touched must come near me. Poet—you dressed slowly, almost deliberately and when

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

Andrews brought you a black tie you tore it to tiny shreds and threw it at him, then you put on the red and blue one I always called "The Biggest Show on Earth." All the colour had been tear-washed from your eyes and your mouth was quivering like that of a tired child who wants to go to its home and bed. Then the car came and you went downstairs. Everyone turned and stared at you because you weren't quite steady on your feet and because you were young, wonderful and paid more rent than anyone else in the place. The manager smiled and gave you one of those, "Ah, a night out with the boys" smile. That stopped your mouth quivering and when you got into the car your face was a set mask of grey and ivory. Oh, my dear, my dear, I always thought life was very, very difficult for women, but now I'm almost sure it's more difficult for men. We know so much about them and they suspect so little. All this sounds like a sermon or a satirical book you buy for Christmas with two smart lines on every page—heavy paper—heavy material, but then you see, I died when it was Spring—Spring—when every little root and blade of grass was murmuring "Thank God to be out in the air again," and because it was Spring you raced like a crazed thing into the country in that little dog-faced car of yours to bring me leaves. Nothing but leaves. . . . I was with you when you crisped them from one tree to another and because your eyes

## KINDLY OMIT FLOWERS

were tear-cloudy you sometimes got only twigs. Parable. The woman who could never bring any more green and gold into the world again. Simmy and Ken had much of my love. I loved them dearly, but you with your little quivering verses—tired sapphire eyes and utter helplessness in the world—I adored. If there is time (I do not know but that at any moment I may be called to report and stand at strict attention on the outer edge of the Crystal Sea), if there is time, I want to sing you a little story through the clay that clings closer to me than any jet gown I ever had. It's about a man and woman who cared, dared and shared and were eventually flung out on the social rubbish heap. But they were both rather wonderful. The woman had the soul of golden-rod in her eyes and her mind passed over it like wind every time you spoke to her. The man was the ideal Rodin always carried at the back of his brain, with a cleft in his chin and eyes seeing so far one was afraid to call them back to anything so trivial as earth. They loved, Billy Boy—loved with every terrible ache and pain that goes with the real, real thing. They were married—but not to each other. Then the agony of it all blazed and seared them from what people call decency and they went away together. It was all too vast for them to cope with—going away together was the only thing left in the world. He died—she did the outrageous thing—hid her child

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

away and went back to the world to live down the mud throwing, and the scandal of it all. Time and Gossip sometimes kiss each other to sleep. . . .

You'll always remember the funny grey day you asked me to marry you. We were standing at that huge bow window of yours that looks exactly like an Opera box and there was wind outside and cloud tatters of hurrying grey and rain that beat against the glass praying to be let in. But I couldn't marry you. I loved you with every heart throb and breath, with every move of an eyelash—loved you so much that I could feel it surging in me through the floor, clinging to me with every move I made. But I couldn't marry you, dear, because I was the woman who did the outrageous thing and hid away her child—you. . . . You always had everything to make you happy—lawyers are paid to arrange those things. . . . Oh, the vanity of me! Never think of me as your mother—that sounds staid, old and uninteresting. Think of me as the woman with the soul of golden-rod in her eyes that you wanted to marry. . . . I have sensed quiet things in life—still trees—water, hills and long, long roads of motionless grey dust, but nothing like this. The cool smooth sides of my grave.



# Greater Love





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## *Greater Love*

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I HAD just come back from the country and the town was hot—terribly hot. The apartment seemed to have shrunk to half its normal size and the photographs receded miles in their frames.

Daisy was sweeping the dust cloud off the piano with long tense hands and the trunks were sitting round the room like open mouthed and panting dogs.

“News, my dear,” she said, twirling on the stool. “There isn’t any. Adelaide goes beaming on under a series of wonderful new toques just like a moon-beam that never means to take itself seriously and I have just come back from family and a dryness that not even the Sahara could equal. I’ve stuck new sleeves into the green taffeta, stopped having henna tea parties with my hair and oh—Claudia’s dead. Dead, dear, and the awful part is that it means so little and so much.”

“My dear,” I said with a laugh, “Claudia is one of those women who never dies. God keeps her alive as a pattern for perfect blondes. I grant you that she may possibly have gone to heaven to borrow a harp or find out the exact tilt a halo of

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

paradise should be worn in an earthly revue, but Claudia is not dead. Imagine her at a funeral! The clergyman would read the wedding service instead and the very glass angels fly out of the windows for the joy of looking at her."

The music trickled away to nothing and Daisy's voice was so pointed and thin it seemed she was trying to sew the words into my brain.

"Claudia's dead. I went. There's earth on top of her, wet cold earth, but so many red roses tumbled into her grave first, she won't ever notice it. So we're never going to see her shimmer down the revue board with that wonderful lagging walk of hers or look into those eyes that you once said had been bruised by violets. I took a huge mass of them from you—loose. Her coffin looked as if they were hiding a jewel away."

The piano became grand and splendid in memoriam piling up vast seas and oceans of sound and echoing cadence of exquisite harmonies together.

I stood looking out of the window. In the apartment house across the way a coloured maid was shaking a yellow cloth from a window, lazily, easily, as though the movement was the fragment of an eastern dance. Big grey clouds like hoops were stacked one on top of the other and the drawing blinding heat was something loud voiced and insistent calling up from the street.

## GREATER LOVE

"No," I said, with a dusty curtain tight in each fist, "Claudia's not dead. She's only gone to consult Summer about her new show dresses or take a lost grey day back to April, or hold up a tired star, but Claudia is not what we living, gasping, three-meal-a-day people call dead."

The waving yellow at the window vanished and the clouds drifted from one curve to another from sheer exhaustion.

"If I'd been dead or you'd been dead," I said at last, "anyone could understand it. God doesn't make perfection just to hide it away in a hole. Do you mean to say if I was to go to her now and say, 'Claudia, we've just opened a bottle and are waiting for you,' she wouldn't come easily from the place she's lying down?"

"That's what killed her, dear—she knew—she was told—we all knew."

Daisy's eyes darkened, the piano keys crashed, and her face was buried in her arms.

"It just used to make me happy to know she was alive and glowing in that wonderful quiet flower way of hers. I didn't want her secret. Claudia was different. She wasn't born for a cabaret and then having the boy—oh I don't know, New York gets too much for me at times. I can't keep on dragging about all I know about people. But Claudia. . . ."

She ran her fingers once across the keys, closed

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

the piano and came over to me, taking a tight grip of my coat.

“Yes, my dear, she’s gone and heaven alone knows what heaven will find for her to do. All the angels will give up flying to try and cultivate her lagging walk. Every harpist will want to play for her if she sings, but I don’t think she’ll want to do that. She’s tired out. She had a worm of a secret eating at her heart day and night. It never let her alone. There are happy secrets and then ones like her’s that gnaw you to death.”

Broadway seemed to go mad with motor horns and then eased itself rebelliously into comparative quiet.

“It’s extraordinary to think of never being able to find a person, telephone them—write them, never, never any more. That’s the biggest thing in life. The complete blotting out—it’s so vast. Imagine losing a person—Claudia—lily dust and gold tissue for good! Somebody else will sing her songs and wear her clothes and somebody else’s hands go sparkling about in her rings. I don’t know how you feel about it, but it seems as if someone had dragged up a lovely flower we all loved and left us with nothing—nothing at all. Theatrical people aren’t supposed to die or grow old or anything horrible. They ought to have a special license from God or Death or somebody to go on being at their most wonderful indefinitely. But I don’t think

## GREATER LOVE

Claudia's dead. We'll find her in a car or the subway or queening it on a Fifth Avenue bus, but never, never in a grave—a grave without lights and the drumming of a band."

"You were the last man she danced with—she used to say she was tired, but I think she felt it was stealing up to her."

"But did she never stop it?"

"The champagne? Never. There wasn't anything horrible about it—you couldn't call it intoxication, but she just used to sit there when her turn was done hour after hour and 'mellow.' It seemed to make her more beautiful. She glowed—her eyes used to take on a wonderful sapphire burn that never flickered or wavered. And her voice used to get lagging like her walk—something too beautiful to hurry along. That's what it was night after night. She made an enchanted world of her own that all the crashing of orchestra and crockery couldn't break down. I used to get somebody to take me in almost every evening and when her turn was over she'd come sweeping down on our table like a gracious young tree and then it began—Champagne. Flare. The brand sticks to me like a scar. I can't get away from it. And that's the way she went out—flaring—beautiful like a candle in the wind. It's extraordinary that anybody who honestly means so little in the social code can mean so much when they leave you. If my people—a cabaret—oh my dear!"

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"And we can't do anything—that's the awful part. Can't drive to the cemetery and say we'll wait no matter how long she takes to brush the earth out of her hair. Daisy, the horror of death is its utter finality—the 'no orders taken'—the 'no assistance required'. . . ."

Another wave of heat winged its way into the room and the dusty music stirred on the piano.

"We never knew. . . ."

"I knew from the very start—she told me. Almost the first evening I think I trailed in there by myself and there she was trilling some fool song about roses on the hills of Italy. She came over—for some reason the place was extraordinarily quiet. She knew she was drinking herself to death—then. . . ."

Daisy's hands lifted a little and her eyes burnt to a yellow brown.

"A man?"

"My dear, when white and gold goes wrong it's always a man. He was the agent for Flare—she loved him—can't you guess at the rest?"

"And though I give my body to be burned and have not charity I am nothing," quoted Daisy. "Charity means love. She gave her body to be burned, didn't she—every white satin inch of it—by Flare. It's odd my dear, but a woman often buys her happiness with her misery. She builds her own altar and because she is about to be



## GREATER LOVE

sacrificed experiences an intense joy that never comes into men's lives at all. It's the greater love." She paused for a moment and went dreamily on. "That's what Claudia had. She laid down her life for her friend."

Then she went back to the piano and began to trail long nervous fingers over its stark staring face.

"Play something—not too grand and not too simple. I want to think things out for a little. You'll know what I mean. Learn to understand that there will never be a Claudia any more."

\* \* \* \*

"Can I come and talk to you? It's supposed to look gay or devilish or something. People from the country who tumble in here by accident always stare and draw the worst possible conclusions. They come from the country solely for that purpose. Wine? May I? Let's have Flare—it's got any amount of ting in it and no head after." She was like a young willow tree with a blaze of summer hair. There was the glimmer of a smile always about her mouth even though she wasn't smiling at all and her sapphire eyes were flooded with a wise, quiet understanding. The wine bubbled at her elbow and she raised the glass—"Happiness for us both," she said quietly, and then kept her eyes on the miniature stage, where a wisp of a girl was dancing in blue and gold sequins.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"It's peace, perfect peace being with a gentleman," she said at last, "in this world, if you sit quietly for a moment they think you've had a row. This silent harmony feeling is such a relief. You're terribly sorry for me but you aren't saying anything about it—that's sweet of you. I feel just now I'm back where I belong."

She lifted her glass and I could almost see the bubbling amber passing down her throat.

"My handkerchief—thanks. I did that on purpose. The average man would have told me I'd dropped something—that's all."

The little stage was crowded with girls dressed as birds shaking long feathered tails and nodding huge head-dresses. Waiters stood on dummy-like guard beside the vacant tables or hurried madly up and down with an aggressive air of importance. The bird girls shook themselves almost frantically on the electric lighted board and passed out of sight.

"My turn," said Claudia, "but I haven't to change so I'll come back."

What stinging contrasts there are in life. She passed between the tables utterly unconscious that people were lowering their glasses to look at her wonderful shoulders and the yellow gown held in place by only a tiny chain of jade beads. She swept onto the stage, sang about nothing quite charmingly in a quiet, personal way, and came back to me.

## GREATER LOVE

"My dear," she said, after a long tilting of her glass, "please don't be sorry for me. I think every woman is pushed off into life with a kind of a trunk. I've gone through my carriages and chintz drawing-rooms and burrowed all the way through to this. Sometimes," she filled her glass with a steady hand, "sometimes, I don't think it's me at all but the other woman. Every woman is born twins so that what is bad in her can be blamed on the other half. And oh, my dear—it's such a relief to be able to say to a man who won't misunderstand it—my dear, it's anything but heaven for a woman being twins."

Two by two people wandered out to the dancing floor sliding and twitching to the mad music. Men whispered to women under huge hats. Couples collided with each other, bowed, smiled and swept out again into the whirl. At times the band seemed to grow frantic with effort and break out desperately as though trying to drown all the other bands in the world.

"Just call me Claudia," she said suddenly, as though in answer to a question, "though you know perfectly well it's not my own name. 'Claudia of the cabaret.' It sounds smooth and easy, doesn't it? Just as if I'd been born to the life."

"You'll excuse me but he—I'll see you later—he's just come in."

After a little I shifted my chair to stare at Claudia's fate. To me he seemed an ordinary

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

business man with a brisk face and a smile that came too easily and too often. Claudia at the table was like the priestess at some sacred rite. She sat perfectly still drinking Flare but glowing and glowing as though her very soul was shining up to her hair. The memory faded out gradually and Daisy closed the piano with a crash.

"You can take me out if you're not too tired—we'll go to her place."

"I don't think I could stand it yet."

"Yes you can, and you will," she said, harvesting her gloves and bag that for some reason or other always looked like a little pile of autumn leaves.

"You can talk to Dandy about her and that will make it a little easier. Dandy was with her at the end—went to her—for her. There are wonderful hearts in town, child. When I look at Dandy with her pert painted face and the one shoulder strap that's always slipping, I just tremble and marvel, I have power enough at times to go on existing. Let's take a taxi and see if we can find a breeze hanging round unarrested at one of the avenue corners."

\* \* \* \*

"Well," said Dandy with a quick look, "I can see you've heard—the news is all over your face. I've just stopped shouting something about blue grass and Kentucky, but to me it was all about lilies in

## GREATER LOVE

grave-yards. Most of the people were looking at my back so it didn't matter. Yes, there's no more Claudia for any of us. The dressers cried for a month, that's why I'm always unhooked. You know me dear, I hate women, but Claudia, I'd have gone into the country for her and stayed there if it was doing her any good. Yes, I'll have a drink, but the waiter knows better than to push any of that Flare stuff over on me. There isn't a bottle in the place any way. After I brought her back I fixed all that. Wouldn't appear unless they got rid of it. Think I could dance in a bunch of people who were drinking the thing that killed her?"

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were both wrong and all of a sudden she floated down the board a dream of moonshine and pearls, dimming everybody?"

Dandy dug deep down in the sparkling bodice of her frock.

"She left something for you dear—a letter. It's all spotted with cold cream and stuff, but I guess that won't hurt what's inside."

The band seemed to grow suddenly terrified and spend every ounce of its energy in a crashing turmoil. Dandy dabbed her heavily painted eyes.

"If it's anything private. . . ."

There were big sheets of grey paper, rather thin and rough at the edges. Daisy sniffed dog-like at the envelope.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"Florida water," she said, "she went there once—remember? I went out frocking with her."

What Claudia wrote was so terrible in its simplicity that it took a sickening grip on my heart after the first few lines.

"My dear," and the letters were heavily inked and very, very straight, "it's the man higher up I'm crazy over, not that funny little agent thing Dax. By drowning myself in the stuff I've got him wonderful trade and commissions. They even wanted my face for a trade-mark, but I couldn't stand for that. I knew the stuff was tying round my heart tighter and tighter in huge golden ropes, but somehow I couldn't give him up. Then he got engaged—married—awfully smart person—and then it was too late to stop. It was just like being pushed in a boat out on a huge yellow river and having the oars taken away. I used to scream Flare in my sleep, when the cabarets were closed, thinking that would help him. The doctors told me—two of them, but I couldn't get my feet again. Dandy's come to me and for me—you can guess what the 'for me' means. Love to all I love, excepting life. I'm terribly, terribly tired of that.

Claudia."

Dandy's blackened eyes brimmed and splashed and her face for a moment was a tight little knot of



## GREATER LOVE

painted agony. On the electric lit stage a girl was shrilling that she came from, "The Isle of Kiss, Kuddle and Koo." Dandy slipped away with a pat that left the mark of a little hand on my shoulder.

"Come again—soon," she sniffed and vanished into the whirling crowd. Daisy groped for her fur.

"Furs in August—Claudia dead. I think God's got tangled up in His scheme of things. It's all wrong—so utterly, hopelessly wrong."

In a moment Broadway was spreading out before us like a woman's quivering and overjewelled hand.

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# The Laughing Birds



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## *The Laughing Birds*

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THEY were laughing at her. The sound of it echoing in the shabby room was peculiarly thin—something with an edge to it.

“My dear,” her mother said, “you can’t possibly do it. You *can’t* marry him. Try and remember who you are—a bishop’s daughter. Of course, I know that’s not of the least importance when one goes to the bank and. . . .”

“Judith,” her sister’s voice was placid—tuned to a low key that reminded one of responses and the benediction, “Judith, I think you’re mad—the man’s impossible.”

The girl turned her head in their direction. Before that she had kept her eyes on a presentation clock on the mantelpiece. The little silver shield covered with minute letters—the slowly creeping hands—the squat twisted legs of onyx. She thought it looked like a negro playing leap frog with no one to jump over him. Her fingers in her lap were nothing but clasped marble—no tremor, not a tinge of colour.

“I’ve tried,” she said at last, “I’ve tried to adapt myself and nobody knows how hard I’ve tried. But

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

you've got me here in a trap and I've got to break the bars—or get somebody else to break them. I don't expect them to be kissed away or waved off by a miracle. But I can't breathe here. It's killing me. The people we know—the way we live—every day I get up gasping and I never know whether I'll have enough breath to last me till bed time. Sometimes I just don't care. I wish it was all over—done."

Her mother stared at her. She was a faded thing with startled eyelids that seemed perpetually clinging to her vanished prestige. Crowned with reluctant hair—a cap and a mauve bow so flat that it looked as though someone had hammered it into its place. Her life was over—she was clinging to the respectability of the past with drowning hands. Trades people knew what she had been and gave her an extra dash of courtesy. She adopted it. It made her bonnet feel double its price and transferred her furs into Russian sables. Beryl liked it too—Beryl with a large fresh face and a habit of being always on time. But Judith. . . . ! Unconsciously she raised her hands. The Bishop's ring, a quiet dreamy amethyst drooped on her finger.

"Judith—Judith—I don't understand you."

The girl suddenly stood up and faced her.

"You never have—nobody ever has. I've just sat in a corner of my own heart eating myself by degrees. When I've needed a riot of music, colour

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

and laughter, mother's shown me a pencilled portion of the Psalms. Even our food looks different from other people's. I want food that's gay—something with a paper frill round it and a lot of rainbow tinted sauce. I told you before I've tried to adapt myself—tried till facts have got me on the floor and are strangling me. This house draws in an inch every day. I'm being clutched by it and if I don't get out it's going to squeeze me to death. That's why I'm marrying the man you laugh at and going to Australia. They say it's a big place where one can breathe—live."

Her face was quivering—eloquent.

"You've laughed at him because there's something all wrong with his finger tips and the way he wears his clothes. But I'm not thinking about that. I'm thinking of getting away from that awful broach the woman's auxiliary gave mother—from the stupid flat look in Beryl's eyes that nearly drives me mad and the ghastly feeling of one dead day falling on top of another, without any reason."

Her fair hair had broken away from its pins—her eyes were stinging blue with never a quiver of a lash.

Her mother looked at her in a quick frightened way, clasping and unclasping her hands.

"You don't seem to quite understand. I—I and your sister don't want you to marry this man because we don't consider him your social equal."

The girl laughed.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"I've got just as far as this. It's better to go out and have all your sensibilities and feelings killed in one huge crash than have somebody doing fret-work with them day after day. I want to be numb. That's what he's going to make me, numb. I shan't care any more—shan't feel any more, but at any rate I'll be something that's breathing. The sky won't set a trap for me and I won't have to look at the moon through the end of a street or a window."

"Judith," her sister got up and pushed away the table, "sometimes I think you're mad. We've always been such a nice family. Nothing peculiar or odd. But you. . . ."

"Of course I'm mad," and the girl flung out her arms, "mad as Alice and the March hare. I've married an autumn leaf and had a tree full of children, but I haven't told either of you. I've been confirmed by a single lily as white as papa's sleeves used to be and taken first communion from a white violet, but what was the use of letting you know—you wouldn't understand."

She crushed her handkerchief into a hard little ball and went quickly out of the room. At the end of the staircase she paused and listened for a moment—then up the stairs she raced. They were laughing at her.

\* \* \* \*



## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"I want," he said in a steady flat voice that she instantly knew could never hold any emotion, "I want to be good to you."

The taxi was gliding like a cat ready to pounce on the station.

"Good to me?" she repeated, "but then we're married, why shouldn't you be good to me?"

Then she laughed and went quickly on.

"You've been looking at the comic papers where it's every man's duty to beat his wife with the piano every Saturday night. You know, the kind that always. . . ."

Her voice checked and died away. Quickly she moved and stared at him—the stolid, solid reliable thing who was going to be kind to her. And then her brain turned scales and weighed his heavy handed kindness against. . . . They would be having tea by now, Beryl was tired—there had been more trouble about the supplies—Mrs. Fantay objected to candles and the baker as usual had never sent the scones. Her Mother! The girl in the taxi closed her eyes for a moment. They seemed plastered over with a flat mauve bow of ribbon. She was asphyxiated—almost struggled for breath—the thing *was*, the thing *was* so real.

Something large, warm and firm closed over her hand.

"Judith," he whispered, with his lips close under her wide white hat. "Judith, you haven't kissed me since we left the church."

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"One doesn't—we don't in taxis—it's—it's not decent."

Sounds flooded her ears, rumblings and titters and little half born coughs.

He was laughing at her.

\* \* \* \*

It was just before dinner. The huge ship went from one black cradle to another like a thing sure and certain of its reception. Overhead hung the silver wreckage of the stars and the "ship murmurs" went on like the anthem at a great high ceremonial. The woman in yellow against the rail had been staring at the girl in white—then came to her chair.

"If you don't want me to talk, throw an olive or something interesting down the deck and you will see my face no more." The girl laughed.

"But I love your face. It looks as though you had started in life as a pearl, but had so many affairs—Love changed you into an opal."

The woman drew in her breath quickly.

"An opal—change—change—good heavens—have you seen my hairdresser?"

"I've been watching you ever since we came on board. You have the presence (not the kind father used—father was a bishop) but a vague command that when you allow people to trespass on your crocus hair and onyx eyes you will let them know. Why did you speak to me?"

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"I was wondering about you and your husband—I suppose I'm rude or something, but you're such a beautiful young thing. . . ."

"I left home to keep beautiful. By this time Beryl (it's awful to have a sister—a good sister called Beryl)—By this time. . . ."

She paused, raised one hand and seemed dreaming through her fingers.

"There was—there is a dress—the sort they call dove grey and makes me see red."

"And you would have been expected?"

"Yes. You know the kind—you stand for hours—they've all got their mouths full of pins—the telephone rings—there's a telegram. It's hot and the flies are bad. Then you go down to lunch with only one sleeve in."

The girl's husband loomed out of the shadows.

"Why," the woman in yellow shone and quivered like a sequin, "Why, may I ask, are you importing so much sun and starlight to Australia? Haven't you enough of your own? Heard that the Southern Cross or Victoria Cross (naughty little woman that she is) led intrigues in diamonds all over the sky every night?"

The man's voice held the heavy note of a muffled bell.

"We were just married before sailing so of course she had to come along."

Abruptly the girl's chair creaked.

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"Had to? Oh, how primeval. Life in a cave minus a gas cooker where the sheep come and eat delectably out of your hand. What romance! Perhaps I'll come and stay with you if you give me a purely personal lamb and call me Mary."

"Coming?" called her husband.

"No," said the girl in the chair and watched their undulating figures down the soft lit deck. For a moment she did the wise thing that so many women refuse to do. She relaxed. There was no ship—no lazy following waves—she had never been married—she had never been born. She was a creature touching the wherefore and why, but coming back unbranded. She knew perfectly well no other man would ever come into her life. They were going where men didn't come—not men of her type. But what was she going to do?

She left the chair and leant over the rail as people on big ships always do studying out their charts in foam. Black water rushed softly to greet her and then the dinner bugle blared again. She felt a touch on her arm. Behind her were her husband and the woman in yellow.

"I'm not coming down tonight," she said softly. "I want to scent Australia before it knows I'm on the ship. Want to recite "Ba, Ba, Black Sheep" before it gives me my wool—want to. . . ."

She turned at their two crooked shadows dragging down the deck and then. . . .

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

They were laughing at her.

\* \* \* \*

To the girl the train was like a snake coiling its way among the trees and it was always trees. They swept down upon her from great heights and came creeping out of allies as though they had been drinking at a river. Many had been tortured to death and left in terrible positions of branched agony. But those living were very splendid—giant tufted things with hundred foot stems splashed with dull mauves and purples. The girl knew instantly she must understand them since they were to be so vast a part of her life.

"Harry, what are those trees?"

"Gums."

"But, not all of them?"

"We've got scores and scores of kinds, but they're gums just the same."

He went on with his reading. Trees, more trees, and then trees all over again. She felt she was being drowned in a well of them. It is a terrible thing to have to pay slave homage to nature. To admit the moaning of her seas calls up your dear, dear dead, to stand at your right hand. That the sadness of an autumn wind can open an old wound far more deftly than any surgeon. Rain singing softly against the window brings the tears in sweet, sweet memory of a sorrow hidden far away. The

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

girl sensed what was coming to her—trees. Dusty, grey, green, day by day—year after year. It was their stillness that frightened her. They seemed to be things keeping a great, great secret and on honour bound not to move a leaf. Her terror increased. Harry and trees. Then once again she did as she did on the ship—relaxed absolutely. There weren't any trees—there never would be. As for Harry, she hadn't even met him. Australia? The last long place of all. Her eyes were closed. She was thinking. Only the stillness of the dusty gums and the cloudless burning of the sky had made her realize exactly what it was going to be. Day after day opening to nothingness and closing with a void. Her body would move in and out of the days and nights while her soul tore its maddened shrieking way through the gums. She grew terrified—almost solitary confinement. Then very slowly she found herself drawing on a new unknown force she had never experienced before. The power to numb herself against everything—to everything—even the trees. Hot, hot sun shot across her eyelids and she opened them.

“Oh Harry,” and her hand went impulsively out, “orange trees!”

“You'll soon get used to those dear,” he said, without looking up.

And there they were stealing up and down a



## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

tender hill of curious grey earth—orange trees. Their leaves shone like mirrors cut from emeralds and the heavy golden orbs glowed and dazzled in the sun. The snake-like train twisted a sudden curve and the vision of green and gold was lost between great corridors of ruby coloured rock. Then out again into the great still glare of it all. Rabbits shot madly about like little furry bullets.

“Rabbits,” she began.

“Every time you can get hold of one, wring its neck.”

“But Harry. . . .”

“If you don’t they’ll eat you or some other woman out of house and home. They’re the tiny vampires of the country. Never say anything about them to me.”

She looked down at her hands, then out of the window. How small the things were that kept on gradually altering her life—rabbits and trees. Twilight began advancing its shadow army over the hills and filling up the valleys with a vague nothingness. Soon she would be home. Mechanically she made herself repeat the thought over and over again, but it brought no thrill, only the sense that she was going somewhere, she’d be comfortable and have nothing to do—that was all. Twilight, dull and mysterious, was racing now with the train—their carriage darkened and overhead the electric lights shone like the oranges long, long, left



## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

behind. He put down his book and smiled at her in a kind, dull way.

"You must be tired, but we'll soon be at home and some tea will do you all the good in the world."

"Why tea?" she repeated vaguely.

"Out here it's tea all day long. If you meet anyone in the middle of the night the first thing is to offer them tea."

"How curious," she said.

The train wound its weary way up a hill. The darkness seemed to cling to her like a damp black cloth. He stood up and started to collect their bags and travelling accessories. She watched him like a woman in a dream. She had come to her definite place in the world—the place she had chosen of her own free will. The train stopped suddenly with a shuddering jerk and he held out his hand.

"There's no station or anything dear, and we'll have to drive for a bit."

She was conscious of leaving the carriage and that she stood on a narrow little platform but in an instant the wine cool sweet of the Australian night bore down upon her. She closed her eyes and drew it into her lips with long quivering gasps. Sweetness poured from a bowl of unutterable silence, cold and still. She was conscious of shaking hands with somebody—of saying something politely vague. Conscious of sitting beside her husband and the soft

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

snuffle, snuffle of the horses he was driving. Instantly they plunged into the bush like a diver into water pursued, escorted and held in by trees. Life became terribly vast at a moment's notice.

"Harry," and she touched his arm, "I want to make you as happy as I can and if things don't go right just at first you'll tell me what's wrong, won't you?"

He looked down at her in the dark.

"Of course I will dear, you're my wife."

Then from the blackness that held them in on every side someone—someone began to laugh bitter, shrill and derisive. A laugh with a horror in it, a laugh full of abominable mystery. Something that chuckled over the death of saints and the spilling of innocent blood. A lascivious laugh of lust and anger and desire. Instantly an answer shrilled from the other side of the road. Maddier, badder, but holding the same bitter juice of sarcasm. Further up the road it began, then further still again. She shuddered and covered her ears with her hands. It was something Australian—a secret terror of theirs that would soon be over. But it still went on. She held herself rigidly away from her husband. Wanted to get through this thing if possible without appealing for explanation. At last she could stand it no longer. Her fingers clung to his coat.

"For God's sake, Harry, what is it—who are they—it's ghastly?" [ 277 ]

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

"Our Kookaburras—our laughing birds—you'll soon get used to them. I should have told you."

She buried her face in his coat.

"I can't stand it," she sobbed, "they're laughing at you and me and God and everything that ever was made."

"I'll get you a baby one for a pet," he said absently, "they're pretty."

"No—never," and she shook her head extravagantly as the cart reeled into a rut. "No—never one of those."

"Why not," he asked, "they never laugh if you put one of them in a cage alone."

"They never laugh in a cage," she repeated as though to herself, "they couldn't—no one ever does."

And so through the wild cool sweets of the Australian night she drove to the place called home. She was dimly conscious of a large, low house over which creepers hung like heavy rags, of a garden full of night offerings and beyond that space overlapping space. There were lights at the windows—soft ones—lamps. At the top of the steps her husband held out his hand, but she made no move to take it. She was listening for something—the birds—they broke out again in a shrill ironical cackle and she went quickly in. They were laughing at her.

\* \* \* \*

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

She was determined to take up her life in a calm quiet way. There were to be no scenes—no lonely storms of tears and when what came that she knew must come everything would be different. Time passed by on quiet emotionless feet—the day itself was only punctuated by meals and the name of the day didn't matter in the least. He left her fast asleep and only came back at dusk to find her waiting for him in some simple little gown. She ravished the garden to cover the bareness of the house and one by one removed the things that hurt her eyes. He never noticed it and she marvelled and then in the middle of arranging a huge bowl of spiky red waratah she would come to a full stop with a crying heart.

“What's the use of it—who sees them? Who's going to say how charming?”

Then she locked all that was real of her with a heavy key and went bravely on. She could read—she could sew and by some mad bit of fortune there was a piano. But she became frightened when she played it. The acute tinny notes were too trivial for the hot grasp of the vast outside. She used it once and never touched it again. Months went on. She lived her life with a quiet determination that nothing could destroy. He came in one day with a cage in his hand.

“One of your laughing birds,” he said, and hung it in a misty corner of the veranda.

[ 279 ]

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

The bird looked at the girl—the girl looked at the bird. It was small, of a greeny blue grey with wise, wise eyes and a long slim beak darting from its tufted head searching as though for people's secrets.

"I said I didn't want one, but. . . ."

"But what?"

"It won't laugh at me?"

"They never do when they're alone."

A little later she heard the splashing of bath water and those curious sounds every man makes when he is changing his clothes. From the far end of the veranda the bird was watching her with a bright beady eye.

She went over to it and pressed her breast close against its cage.

"You too?" she whispered, "but I'll let you go some day when nobody's looking—drive you wherever you want to go—sandwiches—thermos—a ticket for the Islands."

It twisted its head to an acute angle and blinked.

"There's nothing for me here," and her voice was a dry wisp of sound. "Nothing but space, sky, trees. . . ."

The Kookaburras were deriding the night and all it held with embittered screams. The one in the cage stared serenely at the girl—at the night—at everything with glassy eyes. A gong sounded—

## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

the girl ran a hurried hand through her hair and went quickly in.

\* \* \* \*

Her chair was close to the motionless cage of the bird—she was sewing quietly thousands of tiny stitches into a hundred tiny, tiny things.

“Well—bird?”

The Kookaburra ambled along its perch and peered at her through the bars.

“My dear,” she said calmly, “when I am free of my duty, my woman’s duty you will be free, but never laugh at me—we know too much about each other. We’re convicts—been in prison together. You know what it means but we’re both going free when,” she touched her forehead, “when we’ve done what fate has ordained for us both.”

She never listened to the silence now—never stared into dusty space at the clouds of misty sleep wandering to and fro. She was living what she called her “veranda life” and treating herself to every ease and comfort possible. Her husband represented Sunday and by him she was able to tell the days of the week—then he was at home all day. She ate, slept, read, picked flowers and there it all ended. There was no scope to use what she had. People lived somewhere—fifty or sixty miles away and even eternity’s not worth a drive in the heat as far as that. She drew a knitting needle along the



## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

bars of the Kookaburra's cage and dropped a little woolly boot into her lap.

"Bird," she began, then after that, nothing at all but went quickly on with her knitting.

"You needn't tell me anything about it—don't lie to me," and her lips twisted, "could anything sweet, white and beautiful draw its first breath from this fiery furnace?"

She was lying motionless in a long chair—her hair like a weed and her eyes fixed on the Kookaburra. She waved thin twig-like fingers towards it.

"I wonder when you're free if you'll laugh?"

The bird only stared at her. Beyond the vine clapped shadow of the veranda twilight was painting in space and the garden with a darkened brush. She was conscious of no deep regret that her child had died—but then with a sweeping of waters and a chaos of thunder, the one grim-faced fact remained. She would not have been alone. There would be someone to worry over—some one to fill in the day. With a weary movement she dragged herself out of the chair—the hand that clutched the Kookaburra's cage was numb—the feet that wandered down the veranda steps unconscious of their destination. She laughed a little, looked at the red burnished disc of the rising moon and then went quickly on.

\* \* \* \*



## THE LAUGHING BIRDS

From a circle of gum trees she stared down at the black water a hundred feet below. The Kookaburra rustled in its cage sensing the noises of the night. Then she began her prayer, "God, I couldn't manage it. Life for me has been too vast to cope with. I've—I've carried everything just as far as I could." Her hand went out to the cage and undid the latch. The bird walked stiffly over the rocks for a moment then sailed away in the darkness with a little rustle of wings.

"Never laugh at me bird—never. . . ."

She stood up with hands at her throat. Trees were whispering and then the Kookaburras began to scream at her. Mocking all her failures—deriding her small triumphs and wilting her very life away. They put the death of her child into a scream—she stood perfectly still listening and looking down at the black water a hundred feet below.

\* \* \* \*

Some people say it was a Monday, but I only read about it in Friday's papers.

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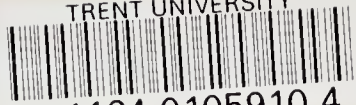








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